The PONY·RIDER·BOYS WITH·THE·TEXAS·RANGERS

FRANK GEE PATCHIN

THE PONY RIDER BOYS SERIES

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$ 300

"The Outlaw Crouched Behind the Rock."

Frontispiece.

The Pony Rider Boys with the Texas Rangers

OR

On the Trail of the Border Bandits

By

FRANK GEE PATCHIN

Author of The Pony Rider Boys in the Rockies, The Pony Rider Boys in Texas, The Pony Rider Boys in Montana, The Pony Rider Boys in the Ozarks, The Pony Rider Boys on the Alkali, The Pony Rider Boys in New Mexico, The Pony Rider Boys in the Grand Canyon, The Pony Rider Boys on the Blue Ridge, etc., etc.

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THE PONY RIDER BOYS WITH THE TEXAS RANGERS

CHAPTER I

EXCITEMENT ON THE WEST FORK

LEAVING the main branch of Delaware Creek, a broad, sluggish stream that slowly made its way toward the muddy Pecos River, a party of horsemen turned up the west branch.

Horses and men alike were wearied, dusty, perspiring and sleepy under the glare of a mid-summer Texas sun. Little had been said for some time. None felt like talking. For hours they had been working south by west, urged on by the green of the foliage that they could see a short distance ahead. At least it had seemed a short distance for the last five hours, but the green trees now appeared to be just as far away as when the party had first sighted them early in the morning.

At the head of the line rode a grizzled, stern-

faced man, sitting on his pony very stiff and erect. Just behind him was a young man, slender, fair haired and smiling, despite the discomfort his red face showed him to be suffering. Still back of them rode three other young men, the last in the line being a disconsolate fat figure of a boy who slouched from side to side in his saddle, each lurch threatening to precipitate him to the ground. The boy's pony was dragging along with nose close to the earth, the bridle rein slipping lower and lower over the animal's neck. The fat boy was plainly asleep. He had been slumbering in the saddle for more than an hour, and occasional mutterings indicated that he was dreaming.

"Professor, don't you think we had better make camp and take a rest?" asked the first boy in the line, addressing the grizzled leader.

Professor Zepplin cast a critical glance down the line of jaded horses and riders, a faint smile twitching the corners of his mouth.

"All tired out, eh, Tad?" he questioned.

"Yes, I'll confess that I am for once. Of course I can stand it as long as the next one, but there's no use in wearing out the stock," answered Tad Butler. "Chunky's asleep. Ned and Walter will be in a few minutes more."

"Very good; call a halt. We will ride into the bushes over there on the other side of the

stream. The water cannot be deep. Some hot coffee will wake us all up."

"Hoo—oo!" cried Tad, interrupting the professor. "Wake up, fellows, and make camp!"

"Wha—what's up?" demanded Ned Rector, straightening in his saddle.

"Nothing's up, except ourselves, and we'll all be down in a minute. We're going to ford the stream and make camp on the other side."

"Is this the Guadalupe range?" asked Walter Perkins sleepily.

"This is the loop all right, but not the Guadalupe," laughed Rector. "Hullo, Chunky's in the Land of Nod."

"Wake him up, Ned," nodded Tad.

"Not much. Let him wake himself up."

"His pony has gone to sleep, too," added Walter.

"Yes, they are a couple of sleepy heads, Tad."

As the lads turned to gaze at the fat boy, they could not repress a shout of laughter. Stacy Brown's pony now stood the picture of dejection, its nose clear to the ground. Chunky had settled in his saddle until it seemed that the boy was less than half his natural height. His body had fairly telescoped itself. The fat boy sat leaning forward, his sombrero tipped

forward until it covered his face, leaving only the point of the chin exposed.

By this time Professor Zepplin had driven his own pony into the creek, the others following, where the horses drank greedily. Stacy and his mount were still on the bank, too sound asleep to think of either water or food.

"Stacy!" shouted the professor.

"Oh let him sleep," begged the boys.

"Too bad to disturb his infantile slumbers," jeered Ned Rector.

"But he will fall off."

"It wouldn't be the first time," laughed Tad. "Gid-ap!"

The ponies climbed the opposite bank, the tired Pony Riders throwing themselves off and quickly stripping the equipment from their mounts. They then led the animals farther into the bushes, where the ponies were tethered until they should be wanted again.

Chunky still slumbered on.

In the meantime Tad was carrying water from the creek, while the other two boys were starting a fire on the bank, the smoke from which was already curling up lazily into the still, hot air. But not much of a meal was cooked. It was too hot to eat or to cook. The boys sat down to their little meal, almost choking with laughter every time they glanced

across the stream toward the sleeping pony and its sleeping rider.

"Most remarkable," nodded the professor. "Surely the smell of food ought to awaken him if nothing else does."

"He's just as much of a sleeper as he is an eater, Professor," declared Rector.

"That would be impossible," objected Tad. "As an eater he is a champion, as a sleeper he is just above the average. You're the champion sleeper of this outfit, Ned."

"It's too hot to resent your unseemly remarks, Tad. I'll take that matter up when we get to the mountains. By the way, how much farther is it to the mountains?"

"Just as far as it was this morning. How about it, Professor?"

"We ought to reach them this afternoon. According to my understanding, we were a little more than forty miles from them this morning. Since then we have gone a good twenty-five miles."

"Then we will camp there to-night?" questioned Walter.

"Yes, I hope so."

"What are we going to do about Chunky?" demanded Walter.

All eyes were directed toward the sleeping fat boy and his slumbering pony. The latter

was now beginning to show some signs of life. It had lifted one foot, then another, until it had taken two steps toward the creek. But the rider was as soundly asleep as before. Nothing seemed to disturb Chunky when he was having a nap.

"He will fall off. Wake him up!" commanded the professor.

"Oh, please don't bother him. We want to see what he will do," begged Walter.

"I think you will see, all right," chuckled Tad. "You will see what you shall see, and—"

"There he goes!"

The pony had taken three or four more steps toward the stream. Now its eyes were partly open. It saw the rest of the party on the other side of the creek.

The cool water completed the awakening process for the horse. It drank freely then started for the other side, Chunky still sleeping. All at once the pony stepped into a deep hole in the creek. The animal went down on its nose with a mighty splash. Stacy shot over the disappearing head, then boy and pony vanished under the waters of Delaware Creek while the others of the party howled with delight.

"Oh, wow!" howled Stacy, coming to the surface and making for shore with mighty splashes, coughs and chokings. "Oh, wow!"

Walter ran down to the water's edge, lending the unfortunate fat boy a helping hand. The pony in the meantime had clambered up the bank and was trotting off to join its fellows.

"What—what—who did that?" demanded Stacy belligerently.

"Did what?" replied Ned.

"Who threw me in?"

"I reckon you threw yourself in," answered Tad.

"I didn't."

"The pony did it for you. Don't be a goose," commanded Ned.

"Yes, you went to sleep. You've been asleep for the last ten miles or so," nodded Butler.

"I'm all wet," wailed Stacy.

"You will be dry in a few moments in this hot sun," interposed the professor.

"I don't want to be dry."

"Then jump in again," suggested Butler. "Anyhow, you've missed your dinner."

"I—I've—what?"

"Missed your dinner."

Chunky's gaze wandered from the camp fire to the dishes and provisions that already were being packed preparatory to moving on.

"I want my dinner," he wailed.

"Dinner is finished, young man," replied the professor severely. "You should be on

hand when meals are being served. There is no second table in this outfit, except for good and sufficient reasons."

"My reasons are good. I—I fell in, I did. And—say, why didn't you fellows wake me up?" demanded the fat boy, a sudden suspicion entering his mind. He began to understand that a trick had been played upon him. "What'd you let me sleep for?"

"Because you were sleepy," answered Ned Rector solemnly.

"That's a mean trick. I wouldn't play that on a horse," answered Stacy indignantly.

"But you did play it on a horse," spoke up Tad. "The horse went to sleep with you, out of sheer sympathy I should say."

"I should think he would have. Anything would go to sleep with Chunky on hand," declared Ned.

"You fellows are too funny! I don't care what you think. I'm going to have something to eat. Where's the biscuit?"

"Packed."

"Then we'll unpack them again. I guess I've got as much right to the grub of this outfit as the next one."

With that Stacy helped himself to such of the food as he was able to find. In order to get what he wanted he was obliged to undo three

of the large packs. Once undone no one would help him lash them together again, so grumbling and growling, the fat boy tugged with the ropes until he had taken a secure hitch about each of the three packages. They made him tie the three before they would allow him to eat the biscuit and cold bacon that he had got out.

While Stacy was munching his cold lunch the others were lashing the packs to the lazy ponies and preparing to start again, every one being anxious to reach the mountains before night fell. But the fat boy was surly as well as sleepy. He felt aggrieved. That his companions should sit down to a meal, leaving him asleep on his pony, filled Stacy with resentment and a deep-rooted determination to be even with them. He was already planning how he could repay his companions in their own coin.

"Better not try it," suggested Tad carelessly as he passed the fat boy on his way to get his pony.

"Try what?"

"To get even," answered Tad laughingly.

"How do you know that I was thinking of such a thing?"

"Perhaps I read your mind."

"Humph! You better learn to read your own before you go prying into mine. I'll show you what I'm going to do."

"Cinch up," interrupted the voice of Professor Zepplin. "We have no time to waste."

Still grumbling, Stacy climbed into the saddle. He promptly fell off, having forgotten to cinch the saddle girth. Now the pony woke up and began to kick as the saddle slipped under its belly. Stacy moved more quickly than he had at any other time during the day. Over and over he rolled in a cloud of dust in his efforts to get out of the danger zone, while the pony kicked and squealed, the boys shouting with laughter.

"Whoa!" roared the fat boy, sitting up after he had reached a place where he considered it safe to do so. "Whoa! Catch him, somebody."

"Catch him yourself," retorted Ned.

Tad's rope wriggled through the air. It caught one of the flying hind feet of the pony. Then the little animal plowed the dirt with its nose, while Walter sprang forward, sitting down on the angry animal's head.

"Now get that saddle off," commanded Tad. "Come, Chunky! Do you think we are going to wait here all day for you?"

The fat boy reluctantly obeyed the command of Tad Butler. After some further trouble, Stacy's pony was properly saddled, but still stubborn and ready for further trouble. The

lad got on this time without falling off, and with much laughter and joking, the party started off toward the blue haze in the distance, the dark ridge that marked the Guadalupes.

It was in "The Pony Rider Boys in the Rockies" that our readers first learned how this little private club of youthful horsemen came to be organized. The need of open-air life for the then sickly Walter Perkins was one of the great factors in the organization of this little band of rough-and-ready travelers. Our readers remember the adventures of our young friends in the fastnesses of the Rocky Mountains. These lads speedily fitted themselves into the stirring life of the big game land, and had other yet more startling adventures in which wild animals did not play so strong a part as did wild men. The story of the discovery of Lost Claim, with its accompanying battle with claim-jumpers, was fully told in this first volume.

It was in "The Pony Rider Boys in Texas" that we found the lads learning the first rudiments of the cattle business. The thrilling part that the young men took in the long cattle drive, with its stampedes, the fording of swollen rivers, the games of the cowboys and the tricks of the cattle thieves, is related in that second volume. How the boys improved their

shooting and mastered the details of that fascinating sport of handling the lariat are all familiar to our readers.

In "The Pony Rider Boys in Montana" is told the story of the long and exciting ride over the old Custer Trail, famous in the tragic annals of our earlier days of Indian fighting. Here the boys found themselves drawn into the life of the sheep men, on those great ranges where the sheep men must still defend themselves from the prejudices, and sometimes from the extreme violence, of the cattle men. It was in this connection that Tad Butler and his friends discovered leading clues in the great conspiracy of certain cattle men against the prosperity and safety of the sheep men. This state of affairs led finally to an angry battle, at which the boys were present. Then, too, our readers all recall Tad Butler's capture by the Blackfeet Indians, and all that befell him ere he succeeded in escaping to his friends.

The next stage of adventures took our lads somewhat further east, as told in "The Pony Rider Boys in the Ozarks." It was a thrilling, desperate time when the boys, with their ponies stolen, found themselves facing actual starvation in the wilds. Tad Butler's perilous trip for assistance is bound to bring throbs of recollection to every reader of that volume. The

imprisonment of the youngsters in a mine, following a big explosion, formed another interesting scene in the narrative brought forth in that fourth volume of the series. It was here that Chunky, as our readers know, displayed the splendid stuff that lurked under his odd exterior and behind his sometimes queer manners. How, in escaping from the mine, the Pony Rider Boys penetrated a mystery that had disquieted the dwellers near the Ozarks for a long time, was one of the most interesting features of the tale.

But such strenuous life proves the mettle of the right kind of young Americans. So, far from being discouraged, or sighing for the comforts of home, we next find our lads in Nevada, as related in "The Pony Rider Boys on the Alkali." Here they left grass behind for the glaring discomforts of the baked desert lands, where severe thirst was one of the least yet most constant perils. Roving from water hole to water hole, finding them all gone dry, nearly drove the youngsters mad. Then, too, the fight with the mad hermit, who seemed a part of the life of that bleak desert, helped to accustom the boys to the strenuous life of daily danger.

As our readers will recall, it was in the next volume, "The Pony Rider Boys in New

Mexico," that the author described the events surrounding the first real acquaintance that our lads formed with the little that is left of the savage Indian to-day. It was here, too, that they beheld the fire dance of the Saboba Indians in all its ancient fury. The adventures of the young horsemen at this point became fast and furious. Between prairie fire and fight they had the most exciting time of their lives.

Later, after a rest at home, as described in "The Pony Rider Boys in the Grand Canyon," the boys visited the wonderful region of the Colorado. Here, as our readers will recollect, the lads were cut off from their trail by the falling of great masses of rock during a fierce storm. Apparently the boys were doomed to remain helpless on a narrow shelf of rock; our readers recall how Tad Butler, at the risk of his life, spent hours in the attempt to get them out of their dangerous situation. The mysterious circumstances that followed the boys all the way along on their journey through the great canyon form a most remarkable series of events.

Now, from Arizona, Tad and his friends had journeyed onward and into the Lone Star State. Here they looked forward only to a long, healthful ride, full of pleasures, yet de-

void of anything like sensational excitement. Yet one never knows what the day may bring forth, and these young travelers of ours, though they did not suspect it, were on the threshold of the most exciting experiences that had yet befallen them. The blue mountain ridge in the near distance was teeming with the story that was to unfold before them. So far the ride had been lonely. Of late rarely had they come in sight of a building of any sort, for this part of the state was but sparsely settled. To meet a horseman was an event. In fact they had not met one since the early morning. The Pony Riders had no guide with them on this journey, believing that one would not be needed. Nor did they carry a pack train. One additional pony bore all their extra baggage, each mount being loaded with all that he could carry in addition to its rider. For tents they had brought one large enough to accommodate the entire party. This was in sections, carried on the different ponies.

Five o'clock had come and gone. The sun was partly hidden by the ridge of the Guadalupes towards which the Pony Rider Boys were slowly drawing. Ned called up to the professor who was riding at the head.

"Where are we going to make camp, Professor?"

"Tad will decide that," answered Professor Zepplin without looking back.

"Near a stream, of course," answered Butler.

"Any mosquitoes there?" demanded Stacy.

"No odds, if there are," retorted Ned. "They wouldn't bite you."

"Not if they had got at you first," returned Stacy solemnly. "There's a level place in there by the creek."

"I see it. I'll ride on and have a closer look at it."

Butler spurred his pony ahead of the others. Reaching the foothills of the range he shaded his eyes, gazing up into the cool, green valley or canyon that led into the mountains.

"I guess this will do very well, boys," he said. "I—"

Bang!

"Wow!"

Stacy with a howl of terror slid from his pony, sending up a little cloud of dust as he collapsed on the plain.

"Wha—what—what—" gasped the professor.

Bang!

Professor Zepplin's sombrero was snipped from his head. Stacy lay groaning on the ground.

"Ride for the rocks!" shouted Tad as shot after shot began popping from somewhere in the mountains, the bullets screaming over their heads close to their ears or snipping up flecks of dust in the plain.

Tad drove his pony straight at Stacy Brown. He scooped the fat boy up by the collar and rode madly for the protection of the rocks, Chunky's heels dragging on the ground. The others rode madly after them, while the shots were still being fired at them. It was an exciting moment. No one knew what the shooting meant, nor did they know whether Stacy really had been hit or not. There was no time to stop to reason the matter out. It was a case of getting to cover as fast as horse-flesh would carry them.

CHAPTER II

A MYSTERIOUS ATTACK

"PULL in close!" cried Tad.

"Where is it coming from?" shouted Ned.

"I don't know. I haven't had time to look. Look out there!"

Professor Zepplin, somewhat slower than

the others, had halted a little distance out from the foothills. A bullet threw up a little cloud of dust just to one side of where he was sitting on his pony, followed by a report somewhere up in the mountains.

"Stop that! Stop it, I tell you!" bellowed the professor, waving his sombrero. Almost ere the words were out of his mouth, the sombrero was shot from his hand and went spinning out to the rear. Professor Zepplin did not wait for further parley. He turned his horse, dashing for the protection of the foothills.

In the meantime, Tad Butler had leaped from his pony, placing Stacy on the ground. It was observed that there was blood on the fat boy's left cheek, but his eyes, wide and frightened, were staring up at the boys now gathering about him.'

"Are you hurt?" demanded Tad breathlessly.

"I'm killed."

"Nonsense! It's only a flesh wound—"

"Is—is he shot?" stammered Walter Perkins.

"Of course I'm shot. Don't you see I am?" demanded Chunky with considerable spirit for a man who had been the mark of a bullet and who according to his own word was dead.

Tad half dragged the fat boy down to the

creek where the blood was quickly washed from his cheek. It was then seen that a bullet had grazed Stacy's cheek, leaving a raw streak across it.

Professor Zepplin, now mindful of his duty, had hurried up to them, and down on his knees was examining the wound critically.

"Hm—m—m!" he muttered. "Bad business, bad business!"

"But—what does it mean?" urged Walter.

"What does it mean? It means that the Germans have got us," wailed Stacy Brown. "Oh, I knew we should be in this war sooner or later, but I didn't think I should be the first man to get shotted up."

"It means some one has been trying to shoot us up," answered Rector.

"Trying!" exploded Chunky. "They did more than try. They succeeded. Don't you see this wound on my countenance? Wait till I get sight of the man who put that mark on my face. I'll bear the scar for life. I—"

"It is my opinion that we are in a dangerous position," declared the professor, getting up and glancing about him apprehensively.

"We were. We are all right here for a little while," replied Tad. "But we shall have to seek other quarters, I am afraid, and that without delay."

"Surely, it must be a mistake," protested the professor. "Some one must have been shooting at us under a misapprehension that we were another party."

"It doesn't make any difference what their motive is, sir," answered Tad. "The fact remains that some one is trying to get us and we must look lively or they will pink one or more of us. Get up, Stacy! You are all right. Lead your pony in here while I take an observation."

Tad mounted his own horse and galloped along at the base of the rocks, well shielded from any one who might be hiding further back in the mountains. The Pony Rider Boy's mind was working rapidly. He was forming a plan of campaign. He was inclined to agree with the theory of Professor Zepplin. Still, theories would not help them at this critical moment. They must protect themselves and at once if they expected to get out alive. One course was plainly open to them. They could mount their ponies and ride out over the plains at a gallop and perhaps escape. However, this plan was rather risky. Besides, Tad did not like the idea of running away.

"No, we've got to do something else," he declared out loud. "I have it!" The boy brought his pony up standing and gazed off over the plain to a point about a quarter of a

mile beyond, where the plain rolled into a hollow, a "hog hollow" as it was called down there.

Butler galloped back to where his companions were standing anxiously awaiting him.

"We are wasting time, Tad," cried the professor as the lad rode up. "It is my opinion that we had better ride into that canyon there and make camp in some secluded spot where we shall not be easily found."

"I am afraid that won't help us any, Professor," said Tad. "How could we expect to hide ourselves in there so completely that a mountaineer would not find us? No, sir, it is my opinion that our only safety lies out there in the open, at least for the rest of the afternoon and the night."

"What, ride out there to be shot up again?" demanded Stacy. "No, sir, not for Stacy Brown! I've been shot up once. I don't propose to make a bull's-eye of myself again."

"Stacy is right, boys. It would be foolishness to follow such a course and—"

"Wait till you hear my plan, sir," urged Butler.

"We will hear it. Proceed."

"Out yonder about a quarter of a mile from the base of the rocks is a depression in the plain. If we can reach it we shall be safe—"

"Yes, if we can reach it," repeated Ned.

"In doing so we should be shot in all probability," objected Professor Zepplin.

"I think not, sir."

"Explain what you mean?"

"From the position occupied by the man or men when they fired at us out there, I am sure they could not see us were we to follow the course I went out on just now. If you will ride down to the edge of the foothills with me and wait there, I will gallop out and prove my theory."

"What do you mean?" questioned the professor.

"I will see if I can draw their fire," answered Tad.

Professor Zepplin shook his head.

"Too risky!"

"It certainly is risky to stay here. Listen, sir. If that man wants to get us he surely will be creeping down on our position before long. We are in greater peril here, where we can't see anything on one side of us, than we would be out there where we have an unobstructed view on all sides. My plan is to make camp out in the hollow; then we will place a guard over the camp, keeping a sharp watch all through the night. By morning we'll be able to find out what is in the wind."

"I won't move a step," declared Stacy stubbornly.

"You will do whatever seems best to the rest of us," answered the professor sternly. Then, after a moment's thought, he added, "I am inclined, upon second thought, to agree with Tad. We will try the plan."

"Good. Follow me. Get that pony, Chunky. I told you once before to catch him. We'll be in a fine mess if you lose your mount."

"I'd rather lose my mount than to lose my precious life," answered the fat boy surlily.

By this time the others were taking to their saddles. The faces of all wore serious expressions. They had not looked for anything quite so lively as this. It was not the first time the Pony Rider Boys had smelled powder when the powder was being expended on them, but they liked it none the better for past experiences.

Stacy's cheek was bleeding again. He was holding his handkerchief to the wound and his face was a little paler than usual.

"Buck up!" commanded Ned. "You're not going to show the white feather, are you?"

"No, it's a red feather I'm showing," wailed the fat boy.

"Forward!" ordered Butler. "Get up, Chunky!"

The party moved off, keeping close to the

rocks, Tad now and then casting apprehensive glances up to their tops. He was not wholly satisfied that they were out of range of the bullets. The man who had been firing at them, too, was practically a dead shot.

"Now spread out," commanded Tad after they had reached the point where he previously had halted. "Don't shout, but when I wave my hand, ride fast for the hollow. I'll be all right; don't worry about me."

With that the lad galloped leisurely out on the plain, his back to the mountains. It was a bold thing to do. Deep down in his heart the Pony Rider Boy expected every second to hear a bullet scream over his head, providing he was fortunate enough not to stop the bullet with his body. Not a shot greeted his bold act.

Tad rode on, finally disappearing in the "hog hollow." A few moments later he rode up the ridge, waving his hands for them to come on. Professor Zepplin started out at once, followed by the others of his party, Stacy this time well up toward the front of the line. For reasons of his own he did not care to drag behind. If there was to be any shooting he wanted to be as far away from it as possible.

The trip was made at a fast gallop and without incident, the party reaching the hollow without having drawn a shot from the enemy.

"It is my opinion," declared the professor, "that, whoever our enemy may be, he has discovered that he has made a mistake."

Tad shook his head.

"I don't think we would be safe in taking that for granted. He did not see us, but he will be on hand before long. I'm going back there before he does see us. If he starts any more shooting you all lie low."

"Where are you going?" demanded the professor.

"On a scouting trip."

"I cannot consent to any such foolhardy business," answered Professor Zepplin sternly.

"It is not foolhardy. We've got to clear up this mystery. Don't you see, we shan't dare go any farther—we simply cannot go into the mountains knowing there is some one there waiting to riddle us the first time he gets a clear sight at us?"

"But what do you propose to do?"

"I don't know, beyond finding out what is up."

"Yes, let him go," urged Stacy. "He's looking for trouble. I'm the only one who has had any experience thus far. It's time some one else made a mark of himself."

"I was thinking of taking you with me," laughed Tad.

"No, you don't! Not if I see you coming," objected Stacy.

"Yes, take him along," urged Ned.

"No, I think I'll take you, the Professor being willing," answered Tad nodding at Rector.

Ned stopped smiling, gazing at Tad to see whether the latter were in earnest. Tad was.

"All right, I'm willing, Tad."

"How about it, Professor?"

"Provided you do not go into the mountains I will agree to your plan. But I cannot consent to your taking further desperate chances."

"I hope you will not hold me to that, Professor."

"To what?" demanded Professor Zepplin shortly.

"To not going beyond the edge of the mountains."

"Plainly, what is it you are planning to do, Tad?"

"I want to find out who it is that is shooting at us and why. That is all, sir."

"You don't suppose it possibly could be the Germans attacking us, do you?" questioned Walter apprehensively.

The professor shook his head.

"If you will stop to think you will see how necessary it is for some one to do something," urged Tad Butler.

"Yes; don't let me do it all," urged Stacy. "I think I have done my share already. It is high time some one else got a move on. First thing we know we shan't know anything. We'll be dead ones, and—"

"Very good. Go on. There will be no peace here unless you have your way. See to it that you are back here in an hour. If not we shall go after you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I will try to get back on time. If something should occur to keep us longer than that please don't worry. You know we might not be able to get away. If we get into trouble I will signal by firing three shots into the air. Are you ready, Ned?"

"Yes. Do we take our arms?"

"Better leave the rifles here. We don't want to be bothered with them. We'll take our revolvers. That will be sufficient."

"Now, Tad, be prudent," begged the professor. "I know you have a level head or I should not permit you to get out of my sight under the circumstances."

"We will be prudent, sir. Come on, Ned; we mustn't waste a moment now. If we are seen to leave the camp we'll fail."

For answer Ned swung himself into his saddle, after first having taken the rifle from the saddle boot and fastened it to one of the packs.

"Don't pitch the tent yet. We must be in marching order," directed Butler, after leaping into his saddle. "And don't worry about us, for we'll be all right."

Nodding to Ned Tad started off at a fast gallop. But despite Tad's cheerfulness he realized that he had taken upon himself a serious piece of work, one that might be the death of both. Still, he was nothing daunted. He was determined to go to the bottom of the mystery, whatever the cost might be to himself.

Tad knew also that he could depend upon Ned Rector, for Ned was brave and resourceful, a boy who would keep his head in an emergency.

They made the trip to the mountains without incident. There Tad pulled up for a conference.

"Now tell me what your plan is?" said Ned.

"First we will ride on a little further along the base here. I see a place where I think we can hide our ponies. I don't want to go back to the point where we first started to make camp. That is the place where our enemy will be looking for us first. But when he gets there we'll be somewhere in the vicinity."

Ned wheeled his pony without further comment and followed Tad at a slow trot along the base of the foothills. The boys were engaged on a more desperate mission than they knew.

CHAPTER III

IN A BAD MAN'S POWER

HAVING secreted their ponies in a dense growth of scrub oak, Tad laid out his plan as follows:

"You, Ned, will go straight in from here until you've got about a quarter of a mile directly inland. When you have done so turn due west. I don't think you can lose your way for you can see out every little while and thus get your bearings."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the point where we first decided to make camp. I shall have easier going than you will, but I shall be in more risk."

"What's the rest?" asked Ned with a short laugh.

"It is my idea to close in on the right fork of the stream there in the foothills. I'll come up from the west and you from the east. In that way we shall close in, you see, covering roughly the greater part of the territory."

"Then you think we shall find our man there?"

"I am sure he will get there eventually, provided he has not seen our movements out there. He will go to the stream and from there he will quickly locate our camp. Understand?"

"As far as it goes, yes. But what are we going to do if we find him?"

"Watch him. Find out what he is up to, then from that on be guided by circumstances. But whatever you do, Ned, don't use your revolver unless it be to save your own life."

"No, I'm not aching to shoot any one. Do you know, Tad, I'm thinking you and I are biting off a bigger mouthful than we will know how to chew?"

"We will manage it somehow."

"What do you think this fellow is trying to do?"

"It looked very much as if he were trying to kill us," smiled Tad.

"It did. But what for?"

"I have an idea the professor was right when he said the fellow mistook us for some other party."

"And he's likely to do it again, if that's the case."

"He may have already discovered his mistake, Ned. You observe he hasn't fired a shot since?"

Rector nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, we must be on the move. We don't want to be caught out here after dark, you know, Ned. Remember, the right fork, where it enters the hills, is the point we have agreed upon meeting. You will strike the stream farther back, then follow it, but be very careful. Be an Indian, Ned. If you are a white man you're likely to lose your identity. We don't want to stop any bullets. Chunky has done quite enough of that for one day."

"I'll watch out—never you fear, old man."

"Then here we go."

Tad crept silently away, hugging the base of the rocks so that it would have been difficult for one at the top to have seen him at all. Ned, obeying his instructions, found a canyon up which he crawled, neither boy making a sound. They had agreed upon the two-shot signal to call each other, three shots being a warning to the rest of their party that they were in need of assistance.

Neither lad saw or heard anything of a disturbing nature on his way out. Ned found no difficulty in making his way into the range of mountains, but as he proceeded and found no one there he grew more bold. Not that he was particularly careless, but he unconsciously relaxed a little of his former caution.

In the meantime Tad Butler had crept on

past the place where the party had first planned to go into camp. Not a sign of a human being greeted Tad's watchful eyes. The lad climbed the side of the rocks, keeping his body hidden in the foliage as much as possible. He had got about half way up when he paused to take a look over the plain beneath him. The Pony Rider Boy could faintly make out the place where his companions were in camp awaiting the result of his mission.

"I believe there's Chunky standing on that rise," muttered Tad. "Yes it must be Chunky. I'll bet the professor doesn't know the boy is out there. Chunky evidently is getting anxious about us."

Bang!

The shot sounded some distance to the eastward of where Tad was secreted. Instinctively the lad glanced toward the camp again. Stacy Brown no longer was to be seen. Tad Butler could not repress a laugh. He had a pretty clear idea as to what had caused Chunky's sudden disappearance. It did not occur to him that possibly Stacy had been hit. As a matter of fact the unknown marksman's bullet had grazed the head of the fat boy, instilling in that young gentleman a more thorough respect for the mountaineer's marksmanship.

But now Tad's mind turned to the object of

his visit to the mountain range. He was there looking for the man who had fired the shot. Ned Rector had heard the shot also. Both boys were making their way toward the spot whence the shot had seemed to come. Ned had located the sound much nearer than had Tad. The latter struck off in a southeasterly direction which carried him still farther into the hills. He had reasoned that the shooter was occupying a high point of vantage somewhere farther in, whence he was taking pot shots at the camp of the Pony Rider Boys. In this Tad was mistaken. The mountaineer was much nearer the plains than Tad thought.

Ned started on a trot immediately after having heard the shot.

"I've got him this time!" exulted Rector. "I've got a chance to show the fellows what sort of a trailer I am. They don't think I'm any good, except Tad, and he knows better."

Tad, as he skulked along, was wondering if Ned had heard the shot and hoping that his companion would make no false moves. Each boy was determined to round up the man who had winged Stacy Brown and narrowly missed killing the others of the party.

Night was coming on rapidly and it behooved the lads to make haste. In the first place they did not know these hills, and, in the second, the

professor would become alarmed and come in search of them were their return delayed too long. This was not desirable. It might mean the undoing of the entire party unless Tad and Ned succeeded in rounding up their enemy first.

Ned, in his excitement, had a mishap. While creeping along the upper rim of a gulley he stepped on a round stone. Ned fell crashing into a heap of rotting limbs and went floundering from there to the bottom of the incline, making a racket that must have been heard clear out on the plain.

The lad got up, his clothing torn, his face scratched, very much chagrined over his blundering fall.

"I guess I'm not so much of a scout as I thought I was," he muttered. "Chunky could have done no worse and for a blundering idiot he's always held the cup up to the present time. I'm glad no one saw me make such an exhibition of myself. But what if that fellow heard me? No, he couldn't. He is too far away."

In this Ned was wrong. The "man" was not so far away as the Pony Rider Boy thought. The fellow, while watching for another opportunity to shoot, had caught the distant sound of crashing twigs. It might have been a falling tree, it might have been an animal. At any

rate it put the fellow instantly on his guard. Lowering his rifle he began skulking in the direction of the racket.

By this time Ned was walking ruefully down the gulley looking for a convenient trail up the side to the ridge. Not that he could not have made the ascent anywhere, but that he did not wish to raise any more disturbance than he already had done. At last, finding what seemed to him to be a path, Ned began climbing the side of the gulley. Had the boy first taken a survey of the ground at the top of the rise, he might possibly have made a discovery, and then again he might not. Crouched behind a rock was a man. The fellow was fingering his rifle suggestively. Twice he raised it to a level with his eyes and drew a bead on the advancing form of Ned Rector, and as many times lowered it.

The watcher observed that Ned carried no rifle, only a revolver slapping against his thigh in its holster as the boy stumbled on up the mountain side. The mountaineer evidently changed his mind about shooting, for he changed ends with the gun and sat waiting. A few moments later Ned stepped up beside the rock where he stood listening and looking about him. The Pony Rider Boy looked everywhere except in the right place.

Suddenly there was a crackling of twigs behind him. Ned turned just in time to see the figure of a man leaping upon him. The boy went down under the crushing weight, the cry that rose to his lips smothered by a stinging blow in the face.

Ned lost consciousness. Everything turned suddenly black about him.

CHAPTER IV

TAD BUTLER MAKES A DISCOVERY

DUSK was already settling over the mountains when Ned Butler fell beneath the powerful onslaught of the mountaineer. Without an instant's hesitation the fellow picked up the boy, starting down the side of the gulley with his burden. The man ran along carrying the lad as easily as if he had been a child.

Reaching a secluded spot near the west fork the fellow put his burden down, then built a little fire under a thick growth of pines, whose tops served to break up the smoke and scatter it, thus greatly lessening the chances of discovery.

It was a few minutes later that Ned regained consciousness. His captor, watching him narrowly, had placed Ned against a tree, passed a piece of rope about the boy's body, pinioning his arms to his sides, securing the rope at the other side of the tree. Then the fellow had squatted down with rifle across his knees.

Ned saw a powerfully-built, wiry man, whose lean face and deep-sunken eyes created a most unfavorable impression. Even under more pleasing circumstances this man would have caused Ned to give him a wide berth. Discovering that he had been bound Ned's face flushed angrily. Even then he did not realize that his position was a perilous one.

"You untie me and let me go, or it'll be the worse for you," threatened Rector.

"I reckon I've got you this time," grinned the mountaineer.

"I know you. You're the fellow who has been shooting at us. You will get what is coming to you when my friends find out what you have done to me. What do you think I am anyway?"

"That's what I reckoned to find out," answered the man. "Who be you?"

"That's what I am asking you."

"I reckon I ain't answering fool questions."

"Why did you shoot at us?"

"Did I?"

"You know you did."

"What's your name?" asked the mountaineer, evading the question.

"My name is Rector—Ned Rector."

"Where you from?"

"Missouri."

"What you doing here?"

"Maybe I am traveling for my health," answered Ned with a half sneer. He was not advancing his own cause by his attitude.

"I reckon you'll answer my questions and without putting on any trimmings either," announced the fellow, shifting his rifle around so that the barrel lay along his right leg, the muzzle pointing straight at Ned. The latter was not greatly disturbed at this. He did not think, for a moment, that the man would dare to shoot him. Ned did not realize what a desperate character he was facing.

"I will answer what I choose. You can't make me answer any questions that I don't want to," declared Rector defiantly.

"I reckon you'll change yer mind before I git done with you. Anybody with you?"

"No, not exactly here," answered Ned quickly, a sudden line of conduct occurring to him. "Unfortunately for me, and fortunately for you, I am all alone. But when my friends

do find out what has happened you'd better look out. You'll be riddled so full of holes that the wind will sigh through your body as if it were a sieve."

"How's Captain Billy?" demanded the man sharply.

"Captain Billy?" wondered Ned.

"Yes. You needn't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

"I most certainly do not. Who is Captain Billy?"

"Know Joe Withem?"

"I do not. Some friend of yours, I suppose?"

An angry exclamation escaped the lips of the mountaineer.

"I reckon they're no friends of mine. I reckon, too, that you'll be answering my questions or you'll be hiking for the Happy Hunting Grounds in about ten minutes from now. I haven't got all night to sit here talking with you. I've got to git through with you; then I'm going to finish the rest of your crowd. You fellows thought you'd play a sharp trick on me, eh?"

"You are mistaken. We did not even know of your existence until you began shooting at us. Why did you do that?"

"If you don't know, I reckon you'll have to

guess. Bill McKay must think we're easy down here, to try a game like that."

"I'll tell him when I see him," nodded Ned.

"I reckon you won't see him right smart. When I git through with you I'm going to send a bullet through your head. Maybe they'll find you here. If they do they'll know what it means, I reckon."

Ned's face paled slightly. There was that in the eyes of the man before him which, all at once, told Ned Rector that the fellow meant what he said.

"Who do you think we are?" demanded the boy earnestly.

"You're part of the Ranger gang."

"The what?"

"The gang known as the Texas Rangers."

Rector laughed.

"You've got it wrong this time. We are not Texas Rangers. We are known as the Pony Riders and we are out for our health and as good a time as we can have."

"Ye can't fool me. That line of talk don't go down at all. I'll tell you what. Bill McKay thought to trap some folks by getting in a bunch that wasn't known down in these parts. I had his little game sized up the minute I set eyes on your bunch. But I'll clip your claws. I'll show McKay that we ain't so easy. Now

you out with the whole story. If you tell it straight, I may think about letting you go. If you lie it's the end of you. I'd as lief shoot you full of holes as I would a yellow dog. Now what's your orders?"

"I haven't any orders, I tell you."

"What did Bill McKay reckon you would do down here?"

"I don't know Bill McKay, I don't know any Texas Rangers, and if they are anything like you and your kind, I don't want to know them. But I do want to tell you that if you don't let me go—that if you heap any more insults on me—it is you who will get a bullet through your miserable hide. I'm getting mad, Mr. Man."

"Oho! Ye be, eh?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then I reckon there's only one thing to do to put ye in a better frame of mind," answered the mountaineer, shifting his rifle about suggestively. "Now I'll give ye two minutes to open up and tell all ye know," was the stern announcement.

In the meantime Tad Butler had not been idle. As the reader already knows, Tad had been deceived as to the location of the shot. He had gone a long distance out of his course. After a time he realized this and at once started back toward the plain. It was his intention to

make the opening where they had first sought to make camp, as it was there or in that vicinity that he was to meet Ned Rector.

The lad settled down to a trot. Every faculty was on the alert, for Butler was a natural woodsman, added to which was an experience of some two or three years in mountain and on plain until Tad was familiar with many of the tricks of the mountaineer.

Suddenly the boy halted and stood with head thrown back sniffing the air.

"Smoke!" breathed Tad. "There is a fire somewhere near here. That means some one is in camp here. I can't be far from the edge now. I must find out where the fire is."

After a few moments of sniffing the lad decided that smoke lay off obliquely to the right of him. Having decided upon this he started in the direction named, but proceeded with much more caution than before as he did not wish to stumble upon strangers until he had first determined whether they were friends or enemies.

At last he saw a faint flicker of light.

"It's there," muttered the boy. "Now we'll see. I hope nothing has happened to Ned. Still, he would have fired his revolver had he got into trouble. He may be waiting for me down by the creek. But I must find out what's

going on here before I take time to look him up. I hope the others don't come and blunder in."

Tad paused in his reflections as the sound of voices reached his ears. Young Butler, crouching low, crept cautiously through the bushes, each foot being placed on the ground as softly as an animal stalking its prey could have done. Not a sound did the young woodsman make. Of course his progress was slow, but it was silent, which was much more to be desired.

Some fifteen minutes elapsed before Tad reached a point where he could get a view of the fire. He was obliged to crawl some three or four rods from that point ere he found a position where he could see the men who were near the fire.

The first to attract Tad's attention was the mountaineer, squatting down with head thrust forward, his rifle held across his chest, the man's hand over the trigger-frame. Butler knew that the first finger of the right hand was toying with the trigger. His glances followed the direction indicated by the muzzle of the weapon. Then Tad's face flushed hot all over. There, back to a tree, a rope twisted twice about his body sat Ned Rector, defiance in face and eyes. Ned was looking straight at his captor. The situation was strained. To Tad, it was maddening.

"What is it you want me to tell you?" demanded the prisoner.

"I've told you that already. What are your orders?"

"And I have already told you, I have no orders from any one."

"How many are in your party?"

"Five, not including the horses."

"I wasn't asking about the cayuses. Who is in charge of you?"

"You wouldn't know if I told you."

"I'm asking you!"

"His name is Zepplin, Professor Zepplin."

"One of them scientific shooters, eh?"

"I don't know about his being a shooter. He is scientific, all right. But what's that got to do with you and me?"

"Did this—this perfesser get his orders from Bill McKay?"

"I should say not," answered Ned with a mirthless laugh.

"Who was it you was to look up?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes you do. Don't try to make a monkey of me. You'll be willing to answer right smart after I've fanned you with a forty-four. Who is it you and your bunch are after?"

"We are after no one. Can't you understand English?" replied Rector with some

"A Rope Twisted Twice Around His Body."

heat. "I have told you that we are here on a trip for pleasure and nothing else."

"You said you was here for your health, a little time ago," grinned the mountaineer.

"Well, what if we are?" snorted Ned.

"Nothing only that I'm going to drill you full of holes. The two minutes is about up. You've lied to me pretty near every word you've said. You said you didn't know Bill McKay when I know you do. You've said he hadn't given you any orders. You've—"

"You're crazy," scoffed Rector.

"I reckon if I am that you're more so if you think I am going to gulp down all them fairy stories. You're young. Mebby you don't know the kind of a game you've stacked up against, but—"

"I ought to have some idea about it by this time," returned Ned. "Everything you have said is a lie and you know it. I don't know you, nor do I want to, being somewhat particular about the people I know. And now once more, are you going to let me go?"

A sudden note of triumph had leaped into the tone of Ned Rector. Ned had seen something that sent the blood coursing through his veins madly. That something was a figure that for a few seconds had been outlined in the faint light of the fire.

The mountaineer caught the change of tone on the instant. His suspicions were aroused. His eyes narrowed. He slowly straightened up until he had risen to his full height. Now the rifle came up to position, ready for work. It was at his chest again. The mountaineer had no need to bring the weapon to a level with his eyes. He could shoot equally well from almost any position.

Rector shot a quick glance over the mountaineer's shoulder. He could not resist one more look in Tad's direction. But that look was fatal. With a roar the fellow wheeled like a flash.

Bang, bang!

The shots were fired with such suddenness that Ned did not realize the fellow had turned until after the rifle had spit two charges of fire and lead. Ned's head dropped. Everything grew black about him again. The lad was in a fainting condition. It was all up with him now.

Ned had tried to cry out, but the words would not come. He could not utter a sound if his very life depended upon so doing.

Ned found his voice at last. It rose in a mighty yell for help, a yell that carried far beyond the spot where those exciting scenes were being enacted.

CHAPTER V

WHEN THE TABLES WERE TURNED

AT the instant when Ned had shot his quick glance at the wondering Tad, the latter with quick instinct, realizing that Ned had made a serious mistake, threw himself flat on the ground.

That move undoubtedly saved Tad Butler's life. At least, two bullets went ripping through the foliage over his head. The move served the further purpose of hiding him from the man who was shooting at him. The mountaineer had not even caught a sight of Butler, quick as had been his turn about. The fellow swung to the right letting go two more shots, evidently believing that he had not fired in the right direction.

In Tad Butler's right hand was gripped a piece of rock that he had grabbed when he threw himself to the ground. The boy came to his feet as if propelled by a spring. At that second the eyes of the mountaineer were fixed on a point several yards to the left of Tad.

Without a sound Tad let go the rock. But

the movement caught the eyes of the ruffian. He swung toward Butler at the same instant pulling the trigger of his rifle.

Once more the rifle roared its savage protest. But that was its last roar for the time being. Almost at the instant when he pulled the trigger the mountaineer received Tad's rock in the pit of his stomach. With such force had the missile been hurled that the fellow staggered back, the rifle falling from his hands, both of which were suddenly clasped over the part of his anatomy that had been struck.

The fellow uttered a howl of pain. He swayed and staggered then fell over a dead limb, landing flat on his back with a crash.

Tad, without an instant's hesitation, sprang forward. The eyes of the plucky Pony Rider Boy were flashing. Tad had not even thought to draw his revolver. But his anger was kindled. He was dangerous in his present mood. He did not pause to think what a terrible chance he was taking in thus rushing forward. Fortunately for Tad, however, the mountaineer was suffering such agonies that he either gave no thought to the revolver that was hanging at his side, or else he was too weak to draw it. He staggered to his feet, swaying, groaning, shoulders hunched forward, chin on his breast.

Young Butler was upon him like a whirlwind.

Whack!

Tad's fist caught the mountaineer squarely on the point of the jaw as the man raised his head half defiantly, one hand groping awkwardly for his pistol.

The fellow went down in a heap.

"Whoop!" howled Ned Rector. "That's the blow that put the finishing touches to father. Cut me loose! Cut me loose! Quick, Tad! He'll be up in a minute!"

Butler had no need to be told this. He knew the first thing to be done was to secure the prisoner. Ned could wait. The danger lay with the man stretched out there on the ground. Tad worked rapidly. His rope was jerked free from his belt. Three swift turns were made about the body of the prostrate man, binding the fellow's arms firmly to his sides.

Next Tad jerked the mountaineer's revolver from its holster and cast it into the bushes. Then he tied the man's ankles together, after which he straightened up and wiped the sweat from his face and forehead.

"Whew! Warm, isn't it, Ned?"

"Rather," drawled Rector. "Warmer for some folks than others. It came near being pretty warm for you. Are you going to cut me loose, or am I to stay tied to this tree for the rest of the night?"

"I guess we will let you up now. We shall have to wait until our friend there comes to his senses before going farther. Tell me how you got into this mess."

"The same way Chunky gets into trouble. I blundered into it." Ned then went on to relate briefly how he had been jumped on by the mountaineer and made prisoner.

"What was he trying to get you to tell him?"

"He accused me of being a Texas Ranger, a member of some fellow's band, a fellow named McKay."

"The band or the man?" questioned Tad.

"That was the man's name. Billy McKay. He's a captain of Rangers, or something of the sort, it doesn't matter much what."

"I rather think it does," answered Butler dryly.

"How so?"

"Why, don't you see, it means that if the Texas Rangers are after this fellow he must be wanted for something very serious. Who is he?"

"You may search me. Stacy may be right after all. There are plenty of Germans in Mexico, so why not some of them up here to stir up trouble? He looks like pictures I have seen of some of those Hun assassins," declared Ned Rector.

"I think I will search him. He may have some more weapons about his person."

Tad found a bowie knife in the mountaineer's boot, but that was the only weapon left on his person. Tad threw the knife away. About this time the prisoner began to show signs of returning consciousness.

"You must have hit him an awful wallop," wondered Ned, standing over the man and eyeing him narrowly.

"I did. I hit him first with a stone, then with my fist. I skinned my knuckles, too."

Ned grunted.

"I'd hate to have you land on me that way. That surely was a sockdolager. He has his eyes open."

"Oh, hullo!" greeted Butler. "We rather turned the tables on you, didn't we?"

"I'll kill you for this!" growled the prisoner hoarsely.

"I don't think you will kill anybody to-night. What I would like to know is what you mean by trying to shoot us up."

"I'll shoot up the rest of you before I get through with you, you and your whole gang. You can tell Bill McKay what I say and—"

"We don't know Bill McKay. We have nothing to do with any of you people down here. We are here for pleasure."

"That's what the other cayuse said. Looks like you wuz, hey?"

"You alone are to blame for present conditions. We were not looking for you. You began shooting at us before we got into the foothills. Who were you shooting at the last time? I mean before you tried to pot me just now."

A growl was the only answer.

"The question is, what are we going to do with this fellow, Tad?" asked Ned. "Surely it won't be safe to let him go, and we can't leave him here to starve to death."

"No. I'll tell you what. We will fix up a litter—by the way, fellow, are there any more of your kind fooling about here?"

"You'll find out whether there are or not," grunted the prisoner.

"Thank you. You have answered my question. I now know you are alone. Ned, can you cut down a couple of saplings?"

"Where do you want to carry him?"

"Down to the fork."

"Then let's drag him. Dragging is good enough for that ruffian—too good for him. He ought to be shot, then rolled down the hill."

"Don't be bloodthirsty. Prisoners of war should be treated with the utmost courtesy and consideration. I guess perhaps we had better not take the time to make a litter. We can

carry him down to the fork. Take hold of the feet. I'll take the heavier end. And you, fellow! You will get along much better if you keep quiet. Remember, no yells nor struggles, else I shall be obliged to put you to sleep as I did a short time since. Do you understand?"

There was no reply to the question.

"All right. Pick him up, Ned," directed Tad.

"Are you going to take his rifle?"

"Yes, I guess perhaps it would be best. The rifle is good evidence," decided Butler.

Tad strapped the weapon to his own back. He did not bother to pick up the revolver or the bowie knife. The rifle was the evidence that he wanted to take with him. Then they gathered their prisoner up. He proved a heavy burden, though fortunately the distance was short to the fork where Tad had decided to carry the man. The fellow had nothing to say, but the expression in his eyes made up for what his lips did not utter. The two boys were glad enough when finally they reached their destination and dropped their burden, though none too gently at that.

"Now what?" demanded Ned.

"I want you to hurry over to where the ponies are tethered, then ride to the outfit. Tell them to pack up and move over here at once.

Give me a signal before you come into the gulch here. I'll answer it if all is right. Then you may come in without fear."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to stay here to keep our friend company. He might get lonesome if we were to leave him alone," chuckled Tad. "Get back as soon as you can. I'll have a fire built, then we'll get supper. Did you know this fellow took another shot at Chunky?"

"No. Was that what he shot at?"

"That was it."

"I hope he didn't hit him."

"I guess not."

"Chunky seems to be getting more than his share of lead to-day," answered Rector with a chuckle. "Serves him right. It'll teach him to be more prudent."

"I don't think you are exactly in the position to say much yourself," replied Tad, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

Ned flushed to the roots of his hair.

"For goodness' sake, don't tell the crowd how I got jumped on. I am as easy as a baby. I'll never call myself a mountaineer again."

"Never mind. You showed your grit at any rate. You didn't appear to be the least bit scared."

"I wasn't. But honest, Tad, now that I've

had time to think it all over, I'm scared stiff right this minute. I believe he would have shot me."

"There is no doubt of it in my mind. So he thinks we are Rangers?"

"Who are the Rangers, anyway?"

"The Rangers are a body of men who did much toward clearing this state of the bad men that infested it for a long time."

"They don't seem to have got them all," replied Rector.

"No, there are some near the border still. The Rangers are a sort of police who range over the state wherever their services may be needed. I understand they are paid by the state. I guess there are not many of them left. The necessity for Rangers is not what it was a few years ago."

"So I should judge from what has just happened," answered Ned somewhat ironically.

"Come, are you going to get started tonight?" demanded Tad with a laugh.

"I'm off this very minute."

Ned hurried away laughing. He bore evidences of his recent encounter with the mountaineer, but all this was forgotten now that the man had been taken and was safely tied up back there in the canyon with the ever vigilant Tad Butler on guard over him.

A short time after that Ned was riding his pony over the plain toward the camp at a fast gallop. He shouted as he neared the camp, where no fire had been lighted, uttering a subdued whoop as he rode in. Chunky and the professor met him a few rods from the camp.

"I—I got shot again!" cried Chunky.

"Where is Tad?" called the professor.

"Over on the fork waiting for us. You are to pack up and return with me at once."

"But—but, the danger," protested Professor Zepplin.

"The danger is past. I don't believe you will have to worry."

"Explain what you mean!"

"I'll leave that for Tad to do after we get over there. Are you all ready?"

"Is Tad all right?" demanded Perkins.

"Fit as a fiddle. You can't put Tad out of business for any length of time. You are to fetch everything. We are going into camp where we originally planned to spend the night," advised Rector.

The professor, very much relieved to learn that the boys had met with no harm, but still somewhat nervous from the hours of fretting he had passed when the lads failed to return, now hastened to get ready to accompany Ned. On the way he explained how Stacy Brown had

been fanned by another bullet when the fat boy indiscreetly showed himself on the rise of ground between the camping place and the foothills of the mountains.

"Maybe you'll learn something one of these days," scoffed Ned.

"I—I've learned something to-day."

"Have you?"

"I have."

"Well, what have you learned?"

"That these fellows down here can shoot to beat the band."

"I have observed something of the same sort myself," muttered Ned, with the memory of the mountaineer's bombardment of Tad Butler.

The party had set out at a slow trot with Ned leading the way. Ned's confidence assured them that all was as it should be, but the young man turned a deaf ear to all their questions, replying only now and then with the remark that Tad would tell them all that was to be told when they got to the camping place.

In the meantime Tad had built up a fire, mainly for the reason that he wanted to keep his prisoner well in sight all the time. Butler knew that the man was a tough customer and that were he to get free it would be a sad night for Tad Butler, and so, too, perhaps, for the rest of the party.

The prisoner had nothing to say, nor did Butler seek to draw the fellow into conversation. But the man was watching every move of the young rider who had so cleverly outwitted and captured him. The mountaineer now believed more firmly than before that these two young men were carrying out the orders of Captain Billy McKay of the Texas Rangers. He swore to be revenged on every man of them when once he had gained his freedom. At present that hour of revenge was a long way off.

Suddenly a loud "Yip! Yip! Yahee!" sounded off on the plain. Tad smiled broadly.

"That's Stacy Brown, I'll wager my hat. I'll bet Ned is scolding him, too."

Ned was. He was at that instant threatening to break Chunky's head if he opened his mouth again before they reached the camping place. Shortly after that Butler's keen ears caught the sound of hoofbeats. He stepped back into the shadows, the prisoner eyeing him inquiringly. Tad did not take the trouble to explain. Let the prisoner think what he might. Then the party rode in in single file. Tad was not in sight. He was hiding in the bushes.

Professor Zepplin pulled up short when his glances finally came to rest on the bound form of the mountaineer; Stacy Brown's eyes grew large and Walter Perkins gasped.

CHAPTER VI

THE CAMP IN AN UPROAR

"TAD! Where is Tad? What does this mean?" demanded the professor.

"Hullo, boys," cried Butler stepping out into the light. "Did you think that was myself tied up there?"

Chunky, in the excitement of the moment, forgot to tell Tad that he had stopped another bullet out on the plain.

"What do you think of our prisoner, Professor?"

"Tad, will you be good enough to explain what this means?"

"Yes, sir. To be brief that's the fellow who shot at us. He tried to kill us both up here in the mountains."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"I guess I ought to know," grinned Rector. "He jumped me, tied me to a tree, then was about to blow my head off when Tad appeared just in time to save my precious life."

By this time Stacy had slipped from his sad-

dle and striding over to the prisoner stood looking down at him.

"So, you're the fellow who potted me twice to-day, are you?" demanded the fat boy sternly. The prisoner made no reply, but he gazed up at his tormentor so savagely that Stacy instinctively took a step backward.

"He is the man, but we landed him," answered Rector proudly.

"Is there any objection to my giving the ruffian a good hard kick for luck?" asked Stacy.

"There certainly is objection to your doing anything of the sort," returned Tad sharply. "We have not come to the point where we treat our prisoners of war the way the Germans do theirs. You let the man alone or I'll have something to say to you."

"Stacy!" rebuked Professor Zepplin sternly.

"Yes, sir?"

"You will keep away from the prisoner. Tad, I want to hear all about this."

"There is not much to tell, except that we got him, though he nearly got us. He caught Ned napping. I should have fallen just the same had I been in Ned's place, for this fellow is a bad man. Ned has told you what happened to him, else I shouldn't have said anything about that part of the affair. While Ned was trying to find where the shot came from that caught

Stacy last, this fellow spotted and captured him. I was hunting for the source of the shot at the same time, but went astray. I was finally attracted by the smell of smoke. I arrived on the scene about the time that fellow was getting ready to take Ned's life. At least, that was the way it seemed to me."

"Yes, he was," interjected Rector.

"You were an easy mark!" jeered Stacy.

"At least I didn't stop two bullets," answered Ned witheringly.

"The fellow caught Ned looking at me and knowing instantly that something was wrong he whirled and shot at me. He missed, then I shied a stone into his solar plexus," said Tad.

"That sounds like astronomy," ventured Stacy.

"You're wrong; it's geography," chuckled Rector. "I'll finish the story. The ruffian fired twice more after the first two shots at Tad; then he went down as the stone landed on him. By the time he had got up, Tad was on the job and punched him in the jaw."

"Boys, boys!" rebuked Professor Zepplin. "One would think this was a prize fight you were describing."

"It's the truth," protested Ned.

"Of course it is," laughed Tad.

"That may be. But be good enough to mod-

erate your language. You can describe the scene without using questionable language."

"Yes, it's disgraceful," added Stacy, whereat Ned gave the fat boy another withering look.

"As I was about to say," continued Rector, "this gentleman of the mountains had got to his feet when Tad gently smote said gentleman on the tender part of his chin. The gentleman fell down and went to sleep like a little child after a full meal. When the gentleman woke up we had him hog-tied—"

"During which time our friend Ned remained tied to a tree," chuckled Butler.

"Pshaw! I thought so," grunted Stacy. "Brave man is Ned Rector! If you were a scarred veteran like myself then you'd have a right to swell out your chest," added the fat boy, gingerly stroking the bullet mark on his cheek. "Well, go on. We're listening."

"That's all there is to tell, Professor, except that we carried the man down here and there he is."

Professor Zepplin stroked his bristling whiskers reflectively.

"What is your name, my man?" he asked stepping up to the prisoner. But the fellow made no reply.

"I said what is your name?" repeated Professor Zepplin.

"What's that to you, old Whiskers?"

The professor started, a faint touch of color showing under his tan, while audible chuckles might have been heard from the boys in the background.

"Such language will not help you. What is your name?"

"Yours will be Mud when I git out of this, you old scarecrow! Don't you stand there jawing over me. I don't like it," added the prisoner, so savagely that the professor shrank back a little.

"It's no use to question him, Professor," spoke up Tad. "He won't answer questions."

"I question our right to hold him," said Professor Zepplin. "We have no proof that he is the man who shot at us."

"I've got proof that he assaulted me," bristled Ned.

"And I that he shot at me four times," added Tad. "I should think that were proof enough. What would you do, Professor?"

"I was thinking that we should let the man go with an admonition."

"No, no, no," protested Chunky. "I don't want to be shot up again to-day."

"Don't be afraid, little boy," urged Rector. "We are not going to let the man go—not if I have to fight for it."

"Professor, this fellow thought us Rangers," began Tad.

"Rangers?"

"Yes. He admitted in his questioning of Ned that he thought we were Rangers, or that we had been employed by the Rangers to run him down. That is why he sought to kill us."

"But surely you assured him we were not," protested Professor Zepplin.

"Little stock did he take in our assurances," scoffed Ned. "You might as well talk to the wind."

"But what are we going to do with him, boys?"

"I have thought of that," replied Tad. "It is my idea that he is a bad man. He must be, else the Rangers would not be looking for him. He has proved that he is a dangerous customer to be at large—"

"Yes, he's large, all right," mumbled Stacy.

"As I was saying, it seems to me to be our duty to turn him over to the officers of the law."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Is there any town near here?"

"Some twenty miles to the southeast, I believe," answered the professor.

"Then that is where we must take him."

"We may find, then, that we have made a mistake," objected the professor, still doubtful about the wisdom of the course proposed by Tad Butler.

"Then we will make a complaint against him ourselves," answered Tad firmly. "I don't propose to let him off after what he has done. Why, were we to let that man go our lives wouldn't be worth a cent. He would shoot us before the night was over. No, Professor, he must be held prisoner until we can get him to town."

"But we can't go on to-night!"

"No. The morning will be time enough. We will give him some food."

"Let me feed the animal," urged Stacy.

"You have steady business performing that office for yourself," retorted Ned Rector.

"In the morning we will take him to town. Shall we get some supper now?"

"Yes. I will think over your proposal in the meantime. Stacy, you might gather some more wood for the fire. Ahem! This has been a most remarkable proceeding all the way through."

"You would have thought so if that fellow had jumped on you as he did on me," growled Ned Rector. "I thought the mountain had fallen down on me. He is bad medicine."

Tad by this time was getting out the things for supper. They were late with this meal owing to circumstances over which they had not had full control, though matters were now pretty well in the hands of the Pony Rider Boys.

"You had better tell us who and what you are. You have heard what has been said here, my man," said the professor returning to the prisoner.

"I reckon I've heard enough. I reckon, too, that you've made a mistake. I ain't what you think. I'll tell you, now that the fresh young feller isn't listening."

"Do so," urged Professor Zepplin, preparing to listen.

"Lean over so the others won't hear."

"Surely."

"You're a right smart old party and I don't mind talking to you, for you've got right smart sense and you'll understand what I'm getting at."

"Say what you have to say, my man. I am listening."

"Between you and me I'm an officer. I'm looking for some parties that have been cutting up didoes down in these parts of late. When I saw your party I thought you were the law-breakers, so I up and let go. I saw that there

were too many for me and it was the only chance I had to—"

"But surely you didn't have to kill us."

"I didn't kill you, did I?"

"True; true."

"I was telling you, I thought you were they and I let go a few shots, just as a tickler. You see, I could have picked you off one at a time just as easy as eating pie. I'm a dead shot, I am."

"Then you only sought to drive us off?" questioned the professor.

"Yes, that's it. You're a wise old party. They're a bad lot, you know."

"But what about this assault on my boys?" demanded the professor.

"Same thing. I thought they were them."

"Your grammar is shocking, my man, but what you say is deserving of careful consideration. You say you took us to be bad men?"

"Sure I did."

"Who did you think we were?"

"Tuck O'Connor and his crowd."

"Who are they?"

"Well, you see, they do some smuggling over the Rio Grande. Then again they are up to a few other tricks that the public hasn't got on to yet. What I want to do is to get away from here, quiet-like, so the youngsters won't get

wise in time to cut up. Of course I ain't afraid of them. I don't want to hurt them, you see."

"I see," observed the professor dryly.

"I've got to get away to-night. If I'm held till morning I'll have to take you all in. You'll all have to go back with me to State Line and you'll be locked up for interfering with an officer."

"How comes it that you feared we were Rangers then, if this be true?"

"Aw, I was jest bluffing. I wanted the youngsters to give theirselves away, you see."

"I see," reflected the professor.

"Then you'll let me out?"

"I am afraid I can't do that."

"Then lean over here and I'll tell you a secret that'll make you change your mind."

The professor leaned closer. The man's hands, free from the wrists, were moving cautiously. All at once Professor Zepplin's revolver was snipped from its holster and a bullet tore through his clothes, taking some of the professor's skin with it. The professor fell back, staggering to one side out of range where he sank down to the ground holding a hand to his side.

CHAPTER VII

RECEIVING A LATE VISITOR

SO unexpected had been the shot that, for a few seconds, the boys stood dumbfounded.

"I'm shot! I'm shot!" yelled the professor.

Bang!

A bullet whistled close to the head of Tad Butler. Stacy Brown, who was just coming into camp with an armful of dry wood for the campfire, dropped his burden and with a howl made for shelter. Tad and Ned had sprung to one side so as to be out of range, while Walter Perkins had flattened himself on the ground.

"Lie still!" commanded Tad sternly as the professor started to get up from where he had sunk down. "Are you much hurt?"

"I—I don't know."

"Drop that pistol, you!" commanded Tad, glowering at the prisoner.

The man laughed.

"I've got you children now," he sneered. "I'll pick you off unless you do as I tell you. Now you come over here. Walk straight, one

hand out. Leave your guns behind. Cut me loose or you're a dead one," commanded the prisoner.

"Oh, am I?"

Tad glanced around to make sure that all the boys were out of range. Then with a quick leap he got entirely out of range of the revolver in the hands of the prisoner. Tad had thought he was out of range before, but the man on the ground had twisted the weapon about until its muzzle was pointing in Butler's direction.

But this time the lad got out of range without question. But he was no better off than before. Reaching for his revolver he made the discovery that he had thrown off his belt with revolver and cartridges before beginning to get supper. The others were in no better shape. Not a boy had his revolver on, and the professor's weapon was in the hands of the prisoner.

"I know a trick. I've played it once to-day and I can play it again," declared Tad, searching for a stone, while the others got well out of the way, watching T. Butler. In an emergency they always looked to him to get them out of their difficulties.

"Professor, you lie still. Don't move. I'll fix this fellow. You had better get a good bit farther off," advised the lad, observing a movement on the part of the mountaineer.

Suddenly the latter braced his head and digging his heels into the ground ran around, pivoting on his head. Tad anticipated the movement by running a few seconds in advance. For a few moments it was a race of wits. The lad as yet had not found a stone suited to his immediate requirements. He was using his eyes in this direction as well as watching the prisoner. Once the latter tried a shot at the boy. The bullet passed Butler rather too close for comfort, but the Pony Rider Boy appeared not to have heard the shot.

Not a word was being said by the lad's companions. The professor lay where he had fallen, the perspiration streaming from his face and body. Up the side of the canyon the big eyes of Chunky might have been seen peering through between the bushes at the exciting scene below.

All at once Tad stooped over. When he straightened up with a bound that carried him several feet to one side, he held a good-sized stone in his right hand.

"Now will you drop that pistol?" demanded the Pony Rider Boy.

"I'll drop you!" roared the enraged enemy.

No sooner had he uttered the words than Tad, with a well-directed toss, dropped the stone fairly on the stomach of the man on the ground.

The prisoner uttered a yell that might have been heard a quarter of a mile away. Ere the yell had died out another stone landed nearly in the same place. The weapon dropped from the hands of the fellow, falling between his legs where he could not reach it without changing his position materially. This he tried to do in a series of quick twists and wriggles, though the boys knew from the expression on his face that he was suffering great pain. It was not surprising, in view of the fact that two rocks, each weighing from eight to ten pounds, had been dropped on his stomach.

The fellow found no opportunity to recover the lost weapon. Tad was upon him with a rush. Grabbing the mountaineer's feet he dragged the man roughly to one side.

"I guess that will be about all for you, my man. You *may* push us too far. I shan't promise to let you off so easily if you try any more tricks. Professor, are you much hurt?"

"I—I don't know. I'm bleeding."

"Let's see what he did to you."

A quick examination developed the fact that the professor had sustained merely a flesh wound. It was bleeding very little now. Tad, at the professor's direction, washed and dressed the wound, binding a piece of cloth firmly about the waist.

"There, I guess you will be all right now. You may come down, Chunky. The fun is all over for the present. How did he happen to get you that way, Professor?"

Professor Zepplin explained how the prisoner had tricked him, declaring his belief in Tad Butler's statement that the prisoner was a bad man. The professor no longer urged the release of their prisoner. Tad smiled mirthlessly. Perhaps it was better that the professor should have had an object lesson. He would take no further chances with the fellow after that. As for the prisoner, he was fairly frothing at the mouth with rage.

Now that the excitement had come to an end for the moment Stacy Brown went about his task of gathering more wood for the fire. This time he went quite a distance down the canyon, carrying a torch that he might the better find that for which he was in search.

Stacy was busy gathering wood, muttering to himself as was his habit, when all of a sudden he straightened up, conscious that some one was standing beside him. As he rose the fat boy's nose nearly bumped into the muzzle of a revolver. The revolver was backed by a not unpleasant, but stern face.

"Wha—wha—what—" stammered the fat boy. "Wh—Wh—Who—"

"Not a sound, young man, if you value your life. Who and what are you?"

"I—I'm a Pu—Pu—Pony Rider Boy."

"A what?"

"A Pu—Pony Rider Boy."

"What are you doing here?"

"Ga—gathering firewood."

"Who is your party?"

"Pro—Professor Ze—Zep—Zepplin and the boys," stammered the fat boy, trembling at the knees. "I haven't done anything, but I'm a bu—bu—bad man when I get ma—mad."

The stern-faced stranger grinned appreciatively.

"You are not the fellows who came in at State Line the other day, are you?"

"Ye—yes, we're the bu—bu—bunch."

"Oh, fudge!" groaned the stranger. "And to think I've been to all this trouble to round up a bunch of tenderfeet." The man thrust his revolver into its holster with a grunt of disgust.

"I'm Withem," he snapped.

"So am I," answered Chunky.

"I said, 'I'm Withem,'" repeated the stranger.

"I said I was too," reiterated the fat boy.

"Look here, what are you trying to get at, young man?" demanded the newcomer with a

slight show of irritation. "Are you trying to make sport of me?"

"N—n—no. You said you were with them —with us—with the crowd, you know. And I said I was too."

The stranger tilted back his head and laughed softly.

"You little cayuse, my name is Withem. W—I—T—H—E—M!" he spelled.

"Oh!"

A broad smile grew on the face of the Pony Rider Boy as he asked:

"What do you reckon you want here?"

"I'm just looking around a bit. I think I'll go to your camp with you."

Stacy surveyed his companion critically from head to foot.

"All right," he said. "If you want to take the chance, I'm willing."

"What chance?" demanded the stranger.

"Tad Butler might take it into his head to throw you out, or something, if he doesn't like your looks."

"I'll take the chance."

"All right; come on. But mind you, it'll be the worse for you if you try to start anything. We're a bad lot, we are, and don't you forget it."

A moment or so later the Pony Rider Boys

were amazed to see Stacy strutting in with a stranger in tow.

"He's with us fellows," was the fat boy's announcement.

"Withem's my name," corrected the stranger.

"Yes, he's with 'em. But he hasn't said who it is he is with. I thought I was with him when he shoved a pistol under my nose."

"Good evening, sir," said Tad stepping up, directing a quick, keen glance of inquiry into the eyes of the newcomer. In that one glance Butler decided that the man was all right. It was a relief to see a face like that after their experience with the mountaineer.

As for the prisoner himself, who lay back in a shadow now, he started violently the instant he beheld the man who had just come into the camp of the Pony Rider Boys. The prisoner looked as if he had a severe case of ague for he fairly shrank within himself.

"You are just in time to join us for a bite, Mr. Withem. That is your name, is it not?"

"That's my name."

"Mine is Tad Butler. This is Professor Zepplin. The young man with whom you came in is Stacy Brown, otherwise Chunky, and here are Mr. Rector and Mr. Perkins. If you will gather around the fire I'll serve the chuck."

"Thanks, young man. You certainly know how to do the honors, as well as how to fry bacon. I could smell that across a county and I'd ride to it as fast as horseflesh could carry me."

"Are you from these parts?" asked the professor after they had seated themselves on the ground.

"Yes, I'm from everywhere," laughed Withem. "By the way, young man, that looks like the mark of a bullet on your cheek," he continued, bending a keen glance on Stacy.

"Then it looks like what it is," muttered the fat boy.

"I don't want to be inquisitive, but—"

"No, it isn't considered good manners to be too curious down in this country, I've heard."

"Right you are, younker," laughed Withem, in which the others joined heartily. "Men have been known to get into trouble by being too curious, especially down on the Rio Grande. The—"

The visitor's conversation was interrupted by something falling over from beside the tree against which he was sitting. That something was the rifle the boys had taken from the prisoner.

Withem picked up the gun with the purpose of replacing it. He was just standing it

against the tree when suddenly he stopped, bringing the gun around in front of him where he could get a better view of it.

The Pony Rider Boys were regarding him questioningly, Tad almost suspiciously. Chunky was wondering if their visitor was going to shoot. The fat boy was ready to run at the first sign of trouble. He had stopped enough bullets for one day. As for the prisoner, his bloodshot eyes were taking in every movement of the man Withem.

"You seem to be much interested," suggested Tad.

Withem flashed a keen, searching look into Butler's face.

"I am."

"Why that's—" began Walter, then subsided at a warning look from Tad.

"Pardon me, but will you be good enough to tell me where you got this rifle? I have good and sufficient reasons for asking the question," said Withem almost sternly.

"We took it from a man who had set out to shoot us up, sir," replied Butler.

"Tried to shoot you up? When? Where?" demanded the visitor with a trace of excitement in his tone.

"This afternoon and to-night. Stacy Brown's cheek bears evidence of the fellow's

marksmanship. It seems the man took us to be officers—Rangers, he said."

"Then you—you talked with him?"

"We did," answered Tad with a twinkle in his eyes. "In fact we held quite a lengthy conversation with the gentleman."

"Explain what you are getting at." Withem was deeply interested in the scant information that had been given to him. They saw that he was containing himself with difficulty.

"Tell, Mr. Withem. Don't beat about the bush," advised the professor.

"Yes; tell me what became of the fellow who shot you up," urged the visitor.

"What became of him, sir?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Why we caught and made him prisoner."

"What!"

"Yes, sir, and we have him now," smiled Tad Butler.

"You've got him now? Where is he?" roared the visitor springing to his feet, permitting the captured weapon to fall to the ground.

"He is over there in the bushes," said Tad. "However, I think you had better wait until I get over there before you pay him a visit. I have a sort of proprietary interest in that fellow and I don't propose to have any monkey business. He nearly killed Professor Zepplin,

bound though he is. Wait one moment, please. Why do you wish to see the man?"

"Because I think I know him. Gentlemen, I am a Ranger. I am Lieutenant Joe Withem, and I have good reasons to believe your prisoner is a man whom I have been anxious to meet for some time. I am ready to be shown."

Tad wonderingly led the way over to their captive, the lieutenant following in quick, nervous strides, the others of the party bringing up the rear, Chunky lugging a rifle which he kept in position for instant use in case the stranger should seek to liberate their prisoner. But there was little danger of Lieutenant Joe Withem doing anything of the sort.

CHAPTER VIII

A MUCH-WANTED DESPERADO

TAD had snatched a burning brand from the fire, carrying it along with him so that Withem might get a good look at the prisoner. The lad considered it a fortunate coincidence that the Ranger lieutenant should have visited their camp at that particular time.

The instant Withem set eyes on the prisoner

he uttered an exclamation under his breath, while the prisoner glared up at him with menacing eyes.

"Hullo, Dunk," greeted the Ranger. "You seem to be in limbo. I reckon you bit off more'n you could chew, for once in your life. Thought you were shooting up Rangers, did you? Instead you barked up against some tenderfeet who were too much for you. I guess you ain't quite so smart as you thought you were."

"I reckon you've made a mistake," growled the prisoner. "I don't know what you're chewing about."

"That's all right, Dunk. I don't reckon it makes any difference what you think about it. We've got you hard and fast, and you're done for. I reckon, too, that the captain will be glad to see you. He'll have a warm welcome for you, you bet. They certainly have you tied up for keeps," laughed the lieutenant, bending over to examine the prisoner's bonds. "They certainly have. Come on, let's finish that bacon," added the Ranger straightening up.

The party took its way back to the campfire, Stacy disgustedly throwing his gun on the ground at the foot of the tree where lay the prisoner's rifle.

"Now, sir, perhaps you will explain who and

what this man is? You appear to be well acquainted with him," said the professor.

"I am that. But how did you get him?"

"Master Tad there will answer that question. He and Rector made the capture."

"You two younkers caught that man?" wondered the lieutenant.

"Yes, sir," replied Tad modestly. "But I'll admit that it was a pretty tough job. He nearly got us."

"Tell me about it."

Tad did so briefly, making as little of his own achievement as possible. He related also, how the prisoner had gained possession of Professor Zepplin's revolver and of the latter's narrow escape from death.

"Boys, you've done a big thing. The captain will be interested in you," said Mr. Withem. "He's been wanting this man for a long time."

"You haven't told us who the fellow is, yet," reminded Professor Zepplin.

"He is Dunk Tucker, sir, one of the most dangerous customers infesting the border. We have been on his trail for weeks, but he's managed to give us the slip every time. We never expected to capture him alive. We expected to have to shoot him on sight, which we probably would have done."

"Is it possible?" murmured the professor. "I did not suppose such conditions existed on the border at this late day."

"They do not, ordinarily."

"What has the man Tucker done?"

"Done? It would be easier to tell you what he hasn't done. He's committed pretty nearly every crime in the calendar and some that aren't in the almanac. He is one of a band of thieves that has been operating on the border for months. They are smugglers and thieves. They have even gone back to the old style of stock stealing. Up to date it is estimated that they have run across the border into Mexico several hundred head of stock. The ranchers are up in arms. The Rangers have been called in to put the Border Bandits out of business. This is the first one of the gang that we have captured. And, after all, we didn't capture him. That was left for a bunch of plucky young tenderfeet—two of them, to be exact.

"Furthermore, it is suspected that Dunk and some of the other bad men of his crowd are in the pay of German agents in Mexico. The Germans are trying to stir up trouble on this side of the line, and these border ruffians are ready to do anything for the sake of easy money, even at the expense of being traitors to their country. It is believed that German

money is finding its way into their pockets. The hounds!" raged the Ranger.

"Surely these men have not resorted to force —committed murder or anything of that sort?" interposed the professor.

"Not that we know of, though some of them did have a pitched battle with a rancher over on the western border of the state. A few stopped bullets, but so far as we know no one was killed. I am telling you all this in confidence. There are a good many in this thing whose names we do not know."

"You can make the prisoner confess, can you not?" asked Professor Zepplin.

"Confess?" the lieutenant laughed. "You don't know these Border Bandits. No, they never confess. There will always be more or less trouble down on the Rio Grande. It is so close to Mexico, so easy to get across the border that bad men cannot resist taking advantage of it. That is why the Rangers are still in business. If it were not for the border we all should be looking for other jobs. As it is there aren't many of us left."

"How many?" asked the professor.

"Some thirty in the state, that is all. We are subject to the orders of the governor, though we're left pretty much to ourselves."

"Who is your commander?"

"Captain Billy McKay."

"That's the man Dunk named. He accused us of belonging to McKay's band of Rangers," said Rector.

"He did, eh?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. Still, he might have shot you up just the same, even if he had known you hadn't anything to do with us."

"Where is the rest of your party, Mr. Withem?" asked Tad.

"They're out on the trail," was the somewhat evasive answer. "I'll get in touch with them sometime to-night or to-morrow."

"But you will take Tucker with you, will you not?" asked Ned.

"I reckon I will," laughed the Ranger.

"Shall we take him along for you? You have no horse?" asked Tad.

"My nag isn't far from here," smiled the lieutenant. "I'll load him on like a sack of meal. He'll get a good shaking up, but it won't hurt Dunk. He's too tough to be bothered by a little thing like that. We'll land him in the calaboose in El Paso by the day after to-morrow. Where are you folks going?"

"We planned to do the Guadalupes, then go on down to the Rio Grande," answered Professor Zepplin.

Withem reflected.

"I reckon the captain will be wanting to see you. There's a reward out for Dunk. Captain Bill is on the square. He'll 'divvy' with you fairly."

"We are not looking for any rewards," spoke up Tad quickly. "You may tell him that whatever reward is paid, belongs to the Rangers. We are glad to have served you, but remember, we did so to save our own skins."

Withem extended his hand, grasping Tad's hand within it.

"You're the right sort, young man. I wish we had you with us."

"In the Rangers?"

"Yes, of course."

"I am afraid that would not be possible," smiled the Pony Rider Boy.

"Wholly impossible," affirmed Professor Zeppiin with emphasis.

"I suppose so. However, I want you to see the captain. I'll tell you what to do." The lieutenant lowered his voice. "We will be in camp to-morrow night about twenty-five miles to the southwest of here. Know where Doble's Spring is?"

"No, sir."

"You can find it. The water gushes out of the rocks pretty high up, falling in a sort of

spray. You can't miss the place. You'll hear it even if it's after dark when you get there. And, further, you'll probably see a campfire, but sing out before you come in too close. Some of our boys are rather sudden when they're interrupted at night," grinned the Ranger.

"I should call it violent," declared Stacy. "The way you poked that pistol in my face back there was a caution. You nearly scared me out of a week's growth."

No one paid any attention to Chunky's interruption.

"Will your captain be there?" asked the professor.

"I reckon he will. But I can't tell for sure. McKay is a pretty busy man. You don't know where to find him. He may be here to-night and to-morrow morning he may be sixty or seventy miles away. You can't tell about Billy McKay."

"Is there any danger of our having difficulties with any of this fellow's companions?" asked the professor apprehensively.

"I reckon not. At least there won't be after you have come up with our party. We'll see to that."

"Where are their headquarters—in these mountains?" questioned Tad.

"We don't know. That's what we're trying

to find out. We have reckoned they had their hang-out here, but we haven't found it yet."

"How many are in this band of Border Bandits?" asked Butler.

"There are some that we don't know. We do know a few of them, however. For instance, there's the Mexican, Espinoso, known as the 'Yellow Kid.' Then there's Greg. Gonzales, a half-breed Mex bandit, and Willie Jones."

"Willie Jones! That's a funny name," laughed Stacy. "That doesn't sound very savage. I shouldn't be afraid of a fellow with a name like that."

"You would if you knew him. Willie is a dude. He dresses like a city fellow with all the frills he can pile on, and he has the manners of a city chap too. But you look out for Willie. There isn't a colder blooded man in the state than Willie Jones. He's quick as lightning on the gun and can hit a bull's-eye with his own eyes shut."

"If he is any worse than our prisoner over there, I don't think I care to make his acquaintance," replied Butler with a laugh.

"He is, young man. You'd know Dunk to be a bad man the first time you saw him. You wouldn't think it of Willie and by the time you get him sized up, it's too late to do you any good. I hope you don't meet with Willie and

try to land him. If you do you'll be carried out on a litter, reduced to a pulp."

"Br—r—r—r!" shivered Chunky.

"Where—where is this bad man supposed to hide himself?" asked the professor.

"I wish I knew," sighed the Ranger. "It would be worth a cold thousand dollars to me and perhaps some more. There's a price on Willie's head. But what's the use speculating about it? We'll get him some day, but he'll be a dead one when we do. I'd a sight rather capture him alive."

The boys listened to all this with deep interest. They had never come in contact with such cold-blooded discussion over human lives. They began to understand something of the things they had read concerning conditions in the Lone Star State in the early days when men's passions ran riot; when practically the only law of the land was the law of the gun. Now, conditions had changed. It was only in certain localities that lawlessness reigned in Texas, but these were bad spots, as evidenced by the presence of the Rangers, that intrepid body of men that for thirty years had been the terror of evildoers. The Rangers were pitted against a worthy foe in this instance, though it was a certainty that in time the Rangers would get their men, either dead or alive.

"And now I reckon I'll be going," decided the lieutenant, after having partaken heartily of the appetizing meal. "I'll be expecting you at the Spring when we get there to-morrow."

"Thank you; we will endeavor to be there. It will be a pleasure to meet your commander. We may get some useful advice from him."

"We'll bring up your horse if you will tell us where he is," offered Tad.

"Thanks, pard. He's on the other side of the creek about fifteen rods from here."

Accompanied by Ned, Tad hurried down, but found some difficulty in locating the horse, so carefully had the animal been secreted. Withem smiled when he saw them coming back.

"I guess you boys are all right," he nodded.

They helped him load the prisoner over the horse's back, after which, giving each of the party a cordial shake of the hand, Lieutenant Withem rode away. They observed that his rifle was resting across the body of the prisoner, as if the lieutenant were looking for trouble. The trouble came sooner than they expected. The Ranger had been gone less than twenty minutes when a volley of rifle shots crashed out.

"He's attacked!" cried Tad.

"Quick! Put out the fire!" shouted the professor.

"Don't wait for the fire. We must go to his assistance!" answered Tad, snatching up his rifle and making a bolt for his pony. "Come on, boys, we've got something to do this time."

"Stop!" commanded the professor.

"What, sit here while a band of bandits are perhaps murdering Lieutenant Withem? I can't do that. You stay here, Professor. We will take care of ourselves. Don't worry about us. Chunky, you'd better stay here with the professor. You haven't got sand enough to—"

"What, me stay here?" shouted the fat boy, starting for his own mount. "I guess you don't know what kind of a man I am. Come on, fellows. Whoop!"

Stacy leaped into his saddle. Ned Rector and Walter Perkins already had taken to their saddles. The professor saw that it was useless to try to stop the boys. He groaned aloud. But Professor Zepplin was very active for his years. Ere the enthusiastic Pony Riders had started to gallop away the professor had made a flying leap into his saddle and a few seconds later was pounding down the canyon, along the West Fork, in the wake of the racing Pony Rider Boys.

"There they are!" cried Tad, as bursting out on the plain they saw vicious flashes of light, accompanied by the crashing of guns.

CHAPTER IX

SHOWING GOOD GENERALSHIP

RIFLES had been jerked from saddle boots as the boys swung to the left, sweeping down over the plain. Tad assumed the leadership of the party, as he usually did in emergencies.

"All hold your fire until I give the word. Keep your heads. Don't get excited!" warned the lad.

"That is good judgment. But try to keep out of the fire," shouted the professor.

Ned Rector laughed.

"We might better have stayed at the camp if that is all we are going to do," he answered.

Tad saw that several men were riding around in a circle shooting at a fleeing horseman whose rifle spoke often and spitefully. The lad knew that the solitary horseman was the Ranger lieutenant.

"The cowards—to attack one man that way!" gritted the boy. "Now, fellows," he called, slacking up slightly, "I want you, when I say go, to yell like mad. Whoop it up for all

you're worth. Then when I say fire, every man shake out his rifle, but shoot high. We don't want to hit anybody unless we have to. We'll make those fellows think the whole troop of Rangers is turned loose on them. Understand?"

"Good! Excellent head work, Tad. I'm proud of you. But I do hope none of you gets hit."

"If you are afraid, drop back to the rear, Professor," suggested Stacy, whereat chuckles were heard from the others.

The bandits had not discovered the advancing horsemen in the darkness, though had they been less interested in seeking to kill Lieutenant Withem they might have observed the little band that was now sweeping down on them.

"Now! Whoop it up, fellows!" Tad raised his voice to an exultant shout.

Chunky's piercing voice punctured the atmosphere in a blood-curdling shout, a wild war-whoop.

"Yip! Yip! Hiyi! Hiyi! Kyaw! Kyeaw! Yip! Yip!"

Despite the seriousness of the situation and the real desperateness of their position the Pony Rider Boys laughed so that they were unable to yell for a full minute. Then they let go

their voices, to which the professor added his own. But his voice was almost wholly lost in the blood-curdling shouts of his young charges.

"Ready—Chunky, aim at the moon or you'll be puncturing some of us. Now fire!"

A volley of shots followed Tad's command. Five rifles crashed out, but their leaden missiles went high, followed by another series of wild yells, whoops and scattering shots.

About this time the Border Bandits discovered the oncoming party of horsemen. All at once they turned their rifles on the Pony Rider Boys. At the first shot in the direction of the boys Tad turned in his saddle.

"Lie low!" he yelled. "Keep whooping and keep shooting. Look out that you don't hit any one. Ride straight at them. They'll give ground."

"I hope to goodness they do," shouted Ned Rector.

"If they don't it's me for the tall timber," cried Stacy, who had overheard Rector's remark.

The bullets sang so close to the boys that the lads could hear them plainly. Had the light been more certain some of them must have been hit, for those men out there knew how to handle rifles much better than did any of the Pony Rider Boys.

With wild whoops and yells, keeping up a continuous fusillade, the plucky band kept straight on.

"It's the Rangers!" They heard the words plainly, uttered by one of the bandits.

"Yip! Yip! Kyeeaw!" screamed the fat boy.

"Yip! Yip! Hiyi!" chorused the others.

"We've got 'em on the run!" yelled Tad, as the circling horsemen swung out into a straight line and began racing across the plains, turning in their saddles to shoot at their assailants.

"Can you see to let them have a few shots into the ground to hurry them along?" called Butler.

"Yes, yes," yelled the boys.

"Be careful," warned the professor.

Bang, bang, bang, bang! answered the rifles of the Pony Rider Boys. The horses of the bandits fairly leaped into the air. Soon after that they faded into dark, uncertain streaks on the white of the plain. Now the rifle of the solitary horseman began to speak again. Joe Withem was not afflicted with any scruples against shooting to hit. He tumbled one man out of his saddle, but the fellow's companions scooped up the wounded bandit, carrying him away with them. Withem thought he saw a man go down, but he could not be sure.

The boys swept past him some distance to the left of the Ranger, still shooting, their purpose being to keep the bandits going until the latter should have been driven so far away that they would not be back that night.

"Swing back!" commanded Tad. The boys pulled their horses down, and wheeling began trotting back. A little beyond they saw Withem galloping toward them.

"You were just in time, fellows. They had me on the hip for sure."

"I'm glad of it," called Tad, "for—"

"What's that? Who are you?" interrupted the lieutenant. Then he pulled his horse up sharply. "Well, I'll be jiggered, if it isn't you."

"That's who it is," laughed Tad. "Are you hit?"

"I stopped a couple, but it doesn't amount to anything. Just flesh wounds, that's all. And you boys put the bandits on the run, eh?" wondered the Ranger lieutenant. "That's another one I owe you. That's another one the Cap'n owes you too."

"Don't mention it."

"How did they happen to discover you?" asked the professor riding up beside the Ranger.

"That's what gets me. I don't understand it

at all. They must have caught sight of me as I was riding out. They surely didn't know I had Dunk with me or they wouldn't have begun shooting at me. They'd have tried to pot the pony in the legs and get me afterwards, though I might have stood them off till daylight."

"Bad, very bad!" muttered the professor.

"I call it very good, sir. Those fellows have had a fright that will keep them going for some hours yet. They think it is the Rangers that's chasing them and they'll be hiking for cover at the rate of some miles an hour."

"You are sure you are not badly hurt?" asked the professor anxiously.

"If I never get any worse, I'll be satisfied. I'm a marked man, you know. Some day, when my gun sticks in the holster, I may get mine."

"Come back to camp with us. Surely you are not going on to-night?"

"Thank you, but I must be getting on. I've got to be at the camp by daylight."

"If you think there is danger of your being attacked, we will ride with you," said Tad.

"No, pard, I'm better off alone. I'll know enough to dodge them now."

"Speaking of danger, you don't suppose these men will come back and visit our camp, do you?" asked the professor.

"No, I don't think so. But were I in your

place I think I'd put out my fire and set a guard for the rest of the night. It's always a safe thing to do. They won't touch you in the daytime; in fact, I think those fellows will be hiding. We'll set a couple of men on their trail just as soon as I get to camp; now that I know where the trail starts. They know I know, and that's what makes me think they won't let the grass grow under their feet."

"I am glad to hear you say so," answered Professor Zepplin. "I am afraid we should not have mixed up in this affair at all, though naturally I am pleased that we have been able to be of some service to you when you might have been killed."

"And some others with me," answered the Ranger grimly. "Well, so long. I'll talk with you to-morrow."

"Good night and good luck!" called the boys.

"Good night, pards," answered the Ranger heartily. Swinging his pony about he galloped away into the darkness, while the boys turned their own mounts toward their camp in the canyon. They had done a good night's work and Tad's generalship alone had won the battle for the Ranger lieutenant. But there were other equally exciting experiences ahead of them in the near future, in which the Border Bandits would play an active part.

CHAPTER X

THE PONY RIDER BOYS INITIATED

IT was rather a solemn party that took its way slowly back to the Pony Rider Boys' Camp in the mountains. The boys realized that they had taken a rather active part in what might prove for them a serious affair. If, by any chance, the bandits learned who had interfered with them, it might be necessary for Professor Zepplin and his charges to make lively tracks for the border and seek other fields of adventure.

The same thought was in the minds of all except Chunky, who held his head erect, his chest swelled out. He was full of their great achievements and was telling what he would do if any of the bandits came to visit their camp.

"I think we will put you on guard to-night, seeing that you are such a brave young man," said the professor with a twinkle.

"On guard?"

"Yes."

"Yes, that's the idea. Let him take the watch," approved Rector.

"You forget that I'm a wounded man. You forget I've been shot twice to-day. Huh! Some of you children take the trick. I've got to take care of my health."

"I guess if we expect to get any sleep we had better let some one else do it," agreed Tad. "Chunky will have us out on false alarms all night long."

They were agreed upon this, and by common consent Butler was given the watch for the night. The boys slept with their rifles beside them that night.

The night passed without incident, Tad Butler keeping a vigilant watch all during the dark hours of the night. He had plenty of time to think matters over. He realized that Dunk Tucker, the prisoner, had overheard all that had been said during their talk with Withem out on the plain. Tad knew that if Dunk ever got into communication with his fellows it would go hard with the Pony Rider Boys.

Soon after daybreak, Tad awakened his fellows. He already had a brisk fire going, but before lighting it, the lad had walked down to the edge of the canyon for a survey of the plain. He saw a solitary horseman far out over the rolling plain. After some study he made up his mind that the man was going away instead of coming toward them.

Breakfast finished the party packed their belongings and started out for their long ride to join the Rangers sometime late in the day.

About noon they made camp for dinner and a rest, not taking up their journey until about four o'clock in the afternoon. Darkness overtook them, finding them still without sight or sound of the Spring where Withem said they would find the Rangers' camp. A consultation was held and it was decided to continue on until they picked up the party.

About half an hour after night had fallen, they were riding along when suddenly they were stopped by a stern command.

"Halt! Hands up! Every man of you is covered!"

"Oh, wow!" gasped Chunky. "They've got us again."

"Who are you?" demanded the voice.

"Who are you?" returned Tad boldly.

"I reckon my question gits the first answer, seeing as I've got the drop on you."

Tad all at once realized that the sound of falling water was in the air. With it came the thought that these must be the Rangers.

"We're the Pony Rider Boys," he said, speaking confidently.

"The which?"

He repeated his answer.

"Wait a minute. Send for Joe," said the man in a lower tone. "You fellows stay just as you are if you don't want some daylight let through you."

"I—I wish we did have a little daylight," stammered Chunky, which elicited a short laugh from his companions. "Yeow!" howled the fat boy as a figure appeared beside him and a pair of iron arms grasped his hands pulling him down, nearly unseating him. "Yeow! Let go!"

"It's all right, boys," spoke up the familiar voice of Lieutenant Withem. "I'd know this fellow in the dark as well as in the light. I'm Withem."

At the lieutenant's reassuring words the Rangers—for the boys had stumbled upon the camp of the men of Captain McKay's command—crowded forward, talking and laughing, three of them taking the horses as the party dismounted, then leading the way into the bushes and in among the rocks where the lads came upon a campfire, around which were seated five or six other Rangers.

Withem introduced the professor and his charges. There were, besides the Lieutenant, Pete Quash, "Dippy" Orell, Cad Morgan, Bucky Moore, "Polly" Perkins and several others, all of whom were introduced in turn,

the Rangers solemn as owls, making low bows, sweeping the ground with their sombreros, causing Stacy to open his eyes in wonderment. Lieutenant Withem made the party feel at home at once.

"Just in time to have chuck with us. You see we have our chuck wagon here. Of course we don't carry it wherever we go. We usually have some central point where we make headquarters. But we have to keep changing these headquarters for reasons you understand."

All hands sat down to the evening meal after the men had washed up, in most instances without removing their hats. This attracted the attention of the fat boy.

"Say, do you fellows sleep in your hats as well as wash and eat in them?" he demanded.

"Do you sleep in your skin?" retorted Dippy.

"Yes, unless it has been all skinned off from me. When I was fighting Indians up in the Grand Canyon—"

"Chop it!" commanded a Ranger. "Men have been known to meet their death for less in this country."

"Can't I say what I've got to say?" demanded the fat boy indignantly.

"Are you going to brag about yourself?" demanded Polly.

"I'm telling you, and—"

"Well, don't tell us. We don't want to have to take you out and tie you to a tree. Say, will you get wise to the dude with the red necktie?" scoffed the Ranger, pointing to Ned, who, in the place of the bandana handkerchief, had put on a flowing tie of brilliant red, tying it about his neck, with the ends carelessly thrown over the left shoulder.

"Don't you like it?" asked Ned, flushing.

"Like it? Why, it's the hottest thing that ever crossed the Staked Plains since the Apaches came down in—"

"Why don't you look the other way then?" interjected Stacy.

"Oho! Listen to the human monstrosity—the monstrosity as wide as he is long and as fresh as he is stale. What you got to say about it, young man?" demanded Dippy, glancing at Tad Butler, who was smiling.

"I haven't said anything yet."

"But you're going to?"

"I may."

"Can we stand for any more remarks, boys?" asked Dippy.

"No, we can't stand for any more," chorused the men, the professor and the lieutenant being too busy with a discussion to pay any heed to what was going on about them.

"Then he shall be washed clean so that he may take a fresh start?"

"That's the idea!"

"Will you go peaceably or must we drag you?"

"I reckon you'd better drag me. If you're going to have fun with me you'll have to earn it. I don't propose to help you out."

"Do you hear?" demanded Dippy in a deep, hoarse voice.

"We hear."

"Then do your duty!"

Two men grabbed the Pony Rider boy up, Tad making no resistance whatever, a little to the surprise of the men who had taken hold of him. They expected the boy to resist, which would have given them still further excuse to handle him roughly. But Tad was used to dealing with the rough and ready characters of plain and mountain. He didn't care particularly what they did. The other boys were delighted that Tad was to be made the mark this time. They followed along laughing and jeering at their companion.

The Rangers fell in behind the two who were carrying Butler, in solemn procession. To look at their faces one would have thought they were performing a solemn duty. The boys wondered where it was going to end. They discovered a

few minutes later. Tad was taken out where the gentle murmur of the Spring falling over the rocks could be heard when the Pony Rider Boys were not making too much noise.

"Do you withdraw the flippant words you used to a member of this august body?" demanded a deep voice.

"No!" cried Tad Butler. "Never! I'll die first!"

"Then take your punishment!"

With that they gave the boy a swing, one holding to the feet the other the shoulders of the lad. When they let go, Tad sailed several feet through the air. Quick as a cat in his movements Tad turned over before he landed, going down on all fours. He thought he was going to strike on the hard ground. Instead he landed at the bottom of a deep pool of water cold as ice it seemed to him. He went in all over. Not expecting anything of this sort the boy was not holding his breath. The result was that he got a mouthful of water. He came up choking, then pretended to go down again. Instead he crawled up to the bank, under which he hid.

A moment passed and the Rangers began to be alarmed. Dippy stepped to the edge of the pool and leaning over peered down somewhat anxiously.

Quick as a flash a pair of arms encircled his neck. Dippy plunged in head first. He did not even have time to cry out. The others, discovering that Dippy had fallen in, rushed to the edge shouting and laughing. Two of them went the way of their companion, Tad having jerked their feet from under them. Within sixty seconds from that time half of the crowd were threshing about in the cold waters of the pool, while Tad, who had crawled out, sat on the bank dripping, watching their struggles.

Stacy Brown was rolling on the ground, howling with delight. All at once he was picked up in a pair of strong arms and tossed in bodily. Stacy howled lustily. Clambering out he squared off for fight, but the only fight he got was another ducking in the pool.

"You—you—you fellows ought to be ashamed to pick on a wounded man that way. Don't you know I've been shot?"

"Shot?"

"Yes, shot."

"He's been shot," chorused the boys and the Rangers together.

"Any of the rest of you kiddies been wounded in the fracas?" demanded Polly.

"No, but you've overlooked two of us," announced Ned stepping out. "We haven't had our baths yet and I reckon we need them."

Without a word, two of the Rangers got up and threw the two remaining boys into the pool. Ned went in with a mighty splash, Walter Perkins landing on top of him, nearly taking away the breath of Rector. They had a rough and tumble scrimmage in the cold water, coming out choking, dripping and laughing.

All this made a favorable impression on the Rangers. Boys who could take rough handling such as this, without losing their tempers or even offering any objection, surely must be worth while. Then, too, there was the story about Tad and Ned having captured the desperado, Dunk Tucker, who was now well on his way to the calaboose in El Paso.

"I reckon you kin go back and dry off now," drawled Dippy. "Anything else you cayuses reckon you want?"

"Yes, you might fetch me a piece of soap," answered Butler laughingly.

"I reckon you'll use sand, young man," answered Orell witheringly.

The Pony Rider Boys made their way back to the camp, wet but happy, the only dissatisfied one in the crowd being Stacy Brown. But their troubles for the night were not wholly over yet. Their initiation was not yet complete. The Rangers had still other plans for their visitors.

CHAPTER XI

BAG-BAITING THE 'POSSUMS

"I GUESS you fellows are forgitting about that 'possum hunt?" drawled Cad Morgan as the boys came noisily into camp.

"'Possum hunt?" cried Stacy, brightening at once.

"I wasn't talking to you," answered Morgan witheringly. "Don't break in when men are talking."

"Men? Where are your men? I want to go 'possum hunting, too."

"So do I," chorused Ned and Walter. Tad did not speak. He was watching the Rangers to see if they meant it. Evidently they did.

"That's so," answered Dippy. "We had plumb forgotten all about it. We better get a move on or we won't have that 'possum for breakfast. Ever go bag-baiting for 'possum?" he demanded wheeling on Tad.

"I never did."

"Neither did I," interjected Stacy crowding in between Tad and the Ranger. "I want to bag a 'possum."

"Better look sharp or the 'possum will bag you," warned Pete Quash.

"I guess I'm not afraid of any 'possum that ever climbed a tree. Haven't I killed lions and bob cats and fought Indians, and—"

"Stop it!" roared Dippy. "I'll be worse'n my name if you keep filling me up with that line of talk."

"What's bag-baiting 'possum?" asked Walter.

"What! You never heard of bag-baiting?" demanded Cad.

"I never did."

"Well, you fellows *are* tenderfeet!"

"May we go along and help?" asked Chunky.

"What do you say, fellows?"

"We might let them on a pinch. I suppose they've got to learn some time."

"All right, you fellows may go out and help us, but it's a job, mind you! You'll get sick of it before you've finished."

"No we won't," cried the boys.

"Well, I reckon we'd better be getting the stuff together," said Cad getting up wearily. "Though I'm afraid the roly-poly will plumb scare every 'possum out of the community."

"If they don't run at sight of you, they'll stand for anything short of a ghost," retorted Stacy sarcastically.

Cad did not reply to this fling. He merely grinned. Tad saw more in that grin than did his companions, but he held his peace. He wanted to see the fun, even if it were still further at his own expense.

Preparations for the 'possum hunt were at once begun. Two burlap sacks were procured from somewhere in the camp. These, with several candles and some stout sticks, made up the outfit for the 'possum hunt.

"Where are you fellows going?" called Withem as he saw the outfit starting away.

"Hunting 'possums," answered Dippy.

Lieutenant Withem smiled.

"I hope you bring back some for breakfast," called the professor. "I am fond of 'possum."

"You won't be of the 'possum they catch," warned the lieutenant, in a low tone.

With pistol holsters slapping against their thighs, Rangers and Pony Rider Boys strode from the camp, circling to the left after leaving the rocky pass where they had their resting place. They followed around the base of the mountains for a half mile. The ground was thickly wooded with second growth and mesquite bush.

Cad finally called a halt.

"I reckon we'll go in here," he said.

"Going to leave a bag here?" asked Polly.

"Sure. Here you, Perkins, catch hold of the bag."

"What do I do?" asked Walter.

"Wait; I'll show you."

Morgan very carefully lighted a candle and stuck it into the ground, packing the dirt about it with his knife.

"Now you hold the bag open. Don't move. Don't jump if you see a 'possum light into the bag. You see the light draws them. It hypnotizes them and they jump right into the light. That means they jump into the bag. The minute one hops in all you have to do is to close the bag, sling it over your shoulder and hike back to camp with it."

"That's easy. I could catch 'possums myself if that's all a fellow has to do," declared Stacy.

"It'll be your turn next, Fatty."

It was. After floundering through the bushes for some distance the Rangers stopped.

"Now, Fatty, it's your turn," announced Cad. "You may have to wait around here for an hour or two while we beat up the bushes and drive the 'possum in, but you won't care. You'll be glad you stayed when you get a nice fat 'possum for your breakfast."

"I'll catch him if he comes this way," replied the fat boy.

"You bet you'll catch it," chuckled Dippy.

"How long do I stay here?"

"Till you git a 'possum," answered Polly. "Mebby that'll be in two minutes and mebby not in two hours, but you've got to stand very still. If you move you'll scare the whole pack of them back into their holes."

Stacy squared himself, holding the opening of the bag close up to the burning candle.

"That's right. A little more to the left with the opening," directed Cad, who had constituted himself the master of the hunt. "Now hold it. You other two lads work around the outside. One of you go to the north, the other to the south about a quarter of a mile, then work gradually in, beating the bushes, slamming these clubs against every tree you come to big enough to hold a 'possum. In that way you'll drive them in."

"Yes, sir," answered Tad and Ned very solemnly.

"And go slow. Just take a step at a time, or some of the birds may get by you."

"A 'possum isn't a bird," corrected Stacy.

"You'll think it is after you've hunted one for an hour or two. Now git going, you beaters. Imagine you're beating the bush for lions. That will keep you from going to sleep on the job."

"How Long Do I Stay Here?"

Chunky's eyes grew large.

"See here, you don't want to stand up straight," rebuked Morgan. "You must lean over just like this," bending himself almost double with his nose close to the ground.

For a half hour Stacy Brown maintained his position. By this time his back was aching, perspiration was running down his face and neck in rivulets. Insects of many shapes and forms, attracted by the light, were hopping about, some getting into the fat boy's eyes, nose and ears, others getting under his clothing. But still he held the bag open. No 'possums came his way. Some few thousands of insects did. A large part of these hopped into the bag. Others crawled in.

In the meantime Tad, his face wearing a grin, had walked away, but instead of beating the bush for 'possum, he headed straight for the camp. He heard the Rangers off to the left, as he emerged from the bush. The men were laughing and talking. Butler reached the camp ahead of them. When they came in they were amazed to see him stretched out comfortably in front of the campfire, taking his ease.

"I thought you were hunting 'possum," cried Polly.

"I thought you were hunting 'possum," laughed the others.

The men looked into each others' faces, then burst out laughing.

"Where's the other one?" meaning Rector, who like Tad was to drive the 'possums in.

"He's hunting 'possum," answered Tad.

An hour later Ned Rector came sauntering in.

"Hullo, did you drive out any 'possum?" called Cad.

"Narry a 'poss," answered Ned carelessly. "I thought I'd leave them for you fellows. I didn't want to hog the whole game, you know."

"Are the other two holding the bags open?"

"I don't know. I suppose they are. They'll be even with you for that," answered Ned.

"By the way, Mr. Withem," said Tad strolling towards him, "I thought we were going to meet Captain McKay here."

"The captain is not here," replied the lieutenant with some reservation in his tone.

"Will he be here before we leave?"

"I can't say. Captain Billy may be here in the morning, then again he may not. If you miss him here, he will see you some other time. He wants to know you, pardner," smiled the lieutenant. "Where is the fat boy?"

"Holding the 'possum bag down in the bush," answered Tad with a grim smile.

The Rangers were pulling off their boots and

one by one crawling into the single tent that did duty as a bedroom for all except the officers, who had a small tent to themselves. The boys were chuckling to themselves. They thought they had a good joke on at least one of the Pony Rider Boys, and perhaps they had.

About two hours after the men had returned to camp, Walter Perkins, with an exclamation of disgust, threw down his bag.

"Let them catch their own 'possums," he said. "I don't believe there are any 'possums in this country to catch. Even if there were we never could get them in a bag this way. I'll bet they have been playing a joke on me. I'm going back to camp."

Half an hour later, Chunky, his back aching like a sore tooth, straightened up with evident effort. The fat boy began to see a light, other than that furnished by the candle.

"I guess I'm the goat," he said regarding the bag reflectively. "Yes, I am the goat all right."

Picking up the candle, Stacy peered into the bag, then he thought some more. The inside of the bag was literally alive with insects. The fat boy quickly closed the bag, twisting the mouth tight and tying it fast with a string. Then blowing out the candle, he shouldered the bag, setting off for camp as Walter had done some

thirty minutes before. But Stacy failed to observe the figure of a man near by as the boy stepped out on the plain. This figure followed along behind him at a safe distance, the man chuckling to himself as he watched the boy and the bag. The mysterious stranger was the Ranger lieutenant.

Reaching the silent camp, Stacy slunk in, apparently seeking to avoid being seen. The grinning lieutenant saw the boy slip cautiously to the tent occupied by the sleeping Rangers. There the fat boy very carefully deposited his 'possum bag, first having opened the mouth of it, after which he slipped away to his own tent and crawled into bed. But Stacy did not go to sleep at once. He lay there listening, gazing up at the roof of the tent through which he could make out the faint light of the sky.

Some twenty minutes elapsed when the boy sat up, thinking he had heard a sound from the other tent. This became a certainty just a few minutes later when a great uproar arose in the tent of the Rangers. Loud voices were heard, threats and shouts. The hundred and fifty-eight varieties of bugs that the fat boy had brought in in his 'possum bag, were getting in their deadly work on the persons of the Rangers. Chunky had turned the tables on his tormentors most beautifully.

CHAPTER XII

INSECTS WIN THE BATTLE

THE Rangers, slapping, scratching and fighting against the armies of insects that were crawling over them, had finally got out of bed and gone out of doors to sleep. But there was no rest there either. Their bodies were covered with ants and fleas, all with well-developed biters—and they bit!

At first the Rangers did not realize the trick that had been played upon them. One who went back to the tent for his hat discovered the burlap sack that had been used in the 'possum hunt. He brought it out, holding it up before his companions. The Rangers eyed the bag, then gazed at each other solemnly.

"Stung!" groaned Dippy.

"Bitten, you mean," answered Cad Morgan.

"Which one played that low-down trick on us?" demanded Pete Quash angrily.

"I reckon it was Fatty," said Polly. "He's the one that would have thought of a thing like that. I reckon there must have been a million of those bugs crawling over me."

"I'll tell you what, fellows. Let's get Fatty out and tie the sack over his head. We'll give him a dose of his own medicine," proposed Dippy. "We can't stand for anything of this sort."

"Look here, boys," spoke up Cad. "Are you welchers? Can't you take your medicine without squealing?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Polly.

"I mean that we fellows put up a job on the kids. The fat baby turned the joke on us, and right smart at that. We're It. We're full of bugs—the worst biters anywhere between the Rio Grande and the northern border. Are we going to squeal? I reckon we aren't. We're going to stand here and let the biters do their worst. I'm mighty near eaten alive, but I'm taking my medicine and I reckon I'll be taking a lot more of the same dose before morning."

"Wal," drawled Polly, "I reckon you're right at that, Cad. But I'd like to wring that little cayuse's neck just for luck."

The "little cayuse" referred to was sleeping sweetly in his tent, untroubled by the distress of the Rangers.

All that night the Rangers walked up and down, slapping their thighs, scratching their legs, for the older the night grew the harder did those fleas seem to take hold.

"I reckon their bills will be so dull by morning, after drilling our tough hides all night, that we won't feel them at all," observed Polly.

A low growl from Dippy Orell was the only reply to the remark. Now and then a man would throw himself down hoping to get a brief nap, but a few moments later he would be up stamping and scratching and growling deeply, threatening vengeance on the boy who had played the trick on them.

Next morning, Stacy Brown, for reasons best known to himself, got up ahead of the others of his party. Stacy took his time in dressing, then strolled out.

"Hullo, I guess the crowd is sleeping late this morning," he muttered. Then he halted. His eyes rested on the 'possum sack that he had left in the tent of the Rangers the night before. A broad grin spread over his face.

"I guess they won't be playing monkey-shines on Stacy Brown right away. I wonder if they got bitten much? I'm all swelled up where the insects made a meal on my skin. Hullo! Hi, fellows!"

Tad Butler and Ned Rector appeared at the door of their tent almost at once.

"Can't you let a fellow sleep?" demanded Ned. "What's the row about? Got a 'possum for breakfast?"

"No, but I've got something else for you."

"What's that?" questioned Butler.

"A surprise."

"What kind of a surprise?"

"Just a surprise surprise, that's all. What do you think?"

"Too early to think. I'm going back to bed," growled Rector. "And don't you dare wake me up again."

Tad stepped out.

"The crowd has given us the slip," announced Stacy.

"What—why they've gone!" exclaimed Tad.

"Yes, they've gone. Gone where there aren't any Pony Rider Boys to make life miserable for them."

Tad was mystified. The Ranger company had disappeared utterly. They had slipped away silently and mysteriously. Even the chuck wagon had disappeared.

"Why, what can it mean?" marveled Tad Butler.

"You may search me. I don't know."

"Hey, Ned!"

"Well, what is it?" growled Rector appearing at the tent opening again.

"They've gone and left us and without even saying good-bye," called Tad. "Shake out the others."

The professor and Walter, having been awakened by the talking, now appeared. They were quickly informed that the Rangers had left, at which they wondered not a little.

"I guess they got tired of our company. I'm going to start breakfast," declared Butler.

"This is most remarkable," bristled the professor. "I should have thought they would have left some word."

"How about that 'possum, Chunky?" jeered Rector.

"You better ask the Rangers. They'll tell you about that," answered the fat boy with a grin. "There's the sack in which I fetched the animals back to camp."

"What, did you catch any?" demanded the professor.

"Oh, I got some game, all right. I'm the champion hunter, I am. Say, I wish I could cook like you," said Chunky gazing admiringly at Tad, who was confidently making some biscuit for breakfast. "I never could cook unless I had everything all down in writing before me. How do you do it?"

"Oh, he cooks by ear," scoffed Ned. "That's why there's so many discords in our digestive apparatus."

The Pony Rider Boys groaned dismally.

CHAPTER XIII

AN INQUISITIVE VISITOR

AT breakfast the plans for the day were discussed. The professor was for remaining in camp, hoping that the Rangers might return later in the day. Tad did not believe this would be the case. He reasoned that the men had been summoned some time during the night to go on a hike, and that they might not return at all; therefore the Pony Rider Boys would be losing time, whereas they might be exploring the Guadalupe range, which stretched away for a hundred miles.

"Still, I can't understand this mysterious departure of our friends, the Rangers," persisted Professor Zepplin.

"Perhaps it was the bugs," suggested Stacy wisely.

"The bugs?" questioned the professor.

Chunky nodded. Tad eyed the fat boy suspiciously.

"Look here, what have you got up your sleeve, Stacy?" he demanded.

"Nothing, I hope. But some of the fellows did."

"Did what?" cut in Rector.

"Did have."

"Did have what?" urged Walter. "A fellow has to have a map to follow you."

"Did have something up their sleeves."

"What was it you think they had up their sleeves?" asked Tad, eyeing the fat boy with growing suspicion.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it was insects."

"Stacy!" rebuked the professor sternly.

Tad recalled that he had discovered thousands of insects crawling over the burlap sack when he came out in the morning. The lad's mind began to unravel the mystery. He thought he understood Chunky's references now, but Tad only smiled. He made no effort to explain, but instead, changed the subject.

"Do we start, or do we remain here, Professor?" he asked.

"It shall be as you boys wish. All in favor of going on will say 'aye.' "

"Aye!" howled the Pony Rider Boys, a shout that caused the browsing ponies to look up in mild surprise.

"Then we move. I will say, however, that I don't exactly approve of the situation."

"What situation, Professor?" questioned Butler.

"There are too many rough men in these

parts. I had no idea we were going to meet with any such condition of affairs in this enlightened state."

"That's nothing. We have had some experience. Experience is what we are looking for."

"But the Rangers were not," asserted Stacy thickly, his mouth full of biscuit. "They got it, though."

"I feel sorry for you," said Tad leaning over to Stacy.

"Sorry for what?"

"For what you'll catch when they get hold of you again."

"They'd better not. I've got something up my sleeve, or I will have, I mean. They'd better keep away from me."

"Come, fellows, are you going to strike camp while I clear away the breakfast things?" called Tad.

"Let Chunky do it. He hasn't done a thing this morning," cried Ned.

"Yes, I have, too."

"What have you done?"

"I've done two things this morning."

"That's news," grinned Walter.

"Yes, name them. We don't want to do you an injustice, you know," urged Rector sarcastically.

"I made a discovery—I discovered that we had been basely deserted."

"Well, that's only one thing. You said you had done two things," persisted Ned.

"Then I ate my breakfast. That's two things."

The boys groaned.

"He ate his breakfast. Most remarkable," scoffed Rector, imitating the professor's voice and manner, whereat the professor himself grinned broadly.

Tad, giving up expecting the others to do anything, was rapidly gathering their equipment together. The tent came down. He divided it into sections, placing the sections in piles preparatory to forming them into bundles to be packed on the ponies.

"Have you the map, Professor?" he called.

"In my saddle bag."

"I want to study it a minute before we start. We don't know anything about the trails here and we have no guide to direct us. We've got to make our way the best we can."

"We can't get lost," chimed in Chunky.

"Why can't we get lost?" snapped Ned turning on the fat boy.

"Because we don't know where we are anyway."

"Horse sense," laughed Tad.

"Fat-boy drivel," jeered Ned.

"Come, come, young men. You are not making much headway."

Stacy dragged his pack by the rope, over to his pony, instead of carrying the bundle as he should have done, Professor Zepplin observing the boy with disapproving gaze.

"Is that the way you have been taught to pack your pony, sir?"

"No. I've never been taught. What I know I've had to pick up. Nobody ever tries to teach me anything."

Scolding, joking, having all manner of sport with one another, the Pony Rider Boys finally completed their tasks. The ponies were loaded, the pack pony was piled high so that its head and legs were about the only parts of its anatomy visible, and the boys climbed into their saddles, Tad first having given the trail map a brief scrutiny.

They started off up the canyon. For a little way the trail appeared to be no trail at all. The ponies threshed through the bushes, the sharp limbs smiting the riders in the faces, making disagreeable traveling. But the young men were used to this sort of thing. They did not appear to mind it at all.

Reaching a higher altitude they found the trail to be fairly good. From there they got a

good view of the yellow plains below, that stretch away many miles to the northward. To the southwest, peaks that they judged must be all of four or five thousand feet high, towered blue and hazy in the yellow light. Birds were singing, the air was soft and balmy and a gentle breeze stirred the foliage about them lazily.

"This is what I call fine," cried Tad.

"Good place for a nap," agreed Chunky.

"Are you in need of sleep?" asked the professor.

"I'm in a trance, sir."

"You always are," laughed Tad Butler. "I think we had better take a rest here. The animals are tired after the climb. Suppose we lie off for an hour?"

The boys were all agreed on this, so the pack pony was unloaded. It now being near midday it was decided to wait for dinner before pressing on. A meal was a "dab" down there and the boys had fallen naturally into the vernacular of the men of the plains.

It was Ned's turn to cook the "dab," a task that never appealed to him. Chunky at such times was always on hand while Ned was getting the meal, that he might offer suggestions and make uncomplimentary observations. Rector's method of making coffee came in for con-

siderable criticism. He never could be induced to make coffee after the more approved methods. Ned's way was to put a pint of coffee beans in a two-quart coffee pot and boil for half an hour. He made it the same way on this occasion.

"That stuff would eat a hole through a piece of sheet iron if given half a chance," declared Stacy.

"Don't worry. It won't hurt you," retorted Ned. "Your stomach is tough enough to withstand anything."

"I guess it is or I'd have been dead long ago eating your dab," flung back Stacy.

They had to wait quite a time for the coffee, but at last the call to dinner was sounded in the usual way, the long-drawn cry of, "Come and get it!"

They had just sat down when they were startled by a voice calling from somewhere off in the bushes to the northward of them.

"Hoo-ee!"

The boys started up, thinking that perhaps some of the Rangers had returned. Instead of the Rangers a stranger rode in on a wiry little pony. He doffed his sombrero gracefully and sat regarding them smilingly.

"Howd'y, pardners," greeted the newcomer. "Got a smack for a hungry man?"

"Certainly, certainly. Come right over, my friend," answered the professor cordially.

Ned stepped forward politely to take the stranger's horse.

"Never mind, lad. I'll look after the cayuse. He isn't over-fond of strangers. You're all strangers down here, eh?"

"Yes, yes. We are," admitted the professor. "You are just in time. We are ready for dinner and there's plenty to go round."

"I'll promise not to eat you out of house and home," laughed the stranger. Without taking off his broad-brimmed Mexican sombrero he threw himself down by the piece of canvas on which the dinner had been laid, helping himself to a slice of bacon which he ate from his fingers in a most democratic fashion. "My name's Conway. Bill Conway. What's yours?"

Professor Zepplin introduced himself and the boys, which Conway acknowledged by polite bows. The man was easy in manner, and his smiling face led the boys to warm to him at once—all save Tad Butler, who, without appearing to do so, was observing the visitor keenly.

The man was slight, almost boyish in figure. His hair was dark, as were his eyes, the latter having a trick of growing suddenly darker than

their natural color, seeming to sink further back in his head under some sudden stress of emotion. The brown fingers were slender and nervous in their movements.

"I'll bet he would be quick on the trigger," was Tad's mental conclusion.

"Are you from these parts?" asked the professor by way of starting the conversation.

"El Paso, when I'm at home. And you?"

"From the north."

"Down here for your health?"

"Partly. Mostly for an outing."

"Just so. I reckon I've heard something about you."

"Maybe it was I whom you heard about," suggested Chunky.

"Can't say as I have," answered Conway, directing a quick glance at the fat boy.

"You don't know what you've missed," answered Stacy solemnly, helping himself to five slices of bacon.

"You didn't happen to meet with any of the Rangers this morning, did you?" questioned Professor Zepplin.

It was the professor's turn to get a sharp look now.

"Rangers? No. Why do you ask?"

"Because we were looking for some of them."

"What for?"

"We wanted to see them about a little matter," hastily interposed Tad Butler.

"What matter?"

There was no stopping the professor.

"Why, we camped with a body of them last night. With Lieutenant Withem, a most affable gentleman. They ran away and left us early this morning. However, I suppose they had good reasons."

"Joe Withem, eh?"

"Yes, that was the man."

"How many Rangers did he have with him?"

"Twelve, wasn't it, boys?"

"Something like that," replied Tad, observing their visitor narrowly. "However, Professor, I hardly think we should speak of them. You see they were on some secret mission and—"

"It's all right, young man. You are safe in confiding in me. In fact, I am going to confide a little secret to you to show you that you have made no mistake."

"We shall preserve your secret, sir," answered the professor with great dignity.

"I thought you would. Lean closer and I'll tell you," almost whispered the visitor.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN THE AIR GREW CHILL

"I'M a Ranger, too," confided the visitor.

"What, you a Ranger?" exclaimed the professor.

"Yep."

"Of Captain McKay's band?"

"You've hit it, pard."

"Well, well, this is indeed a pleasure. We have not had the honor of meeting Captain McKay as yet, but we hope to do so, ere long. He had promised to meet us last night, but I understand was called away on some business pertaining to his calling."

"You would like to meet Captain McKay?"

"Indeed I should. I understand he is a most remarkable man, that he has performed many deeds of valor."

"Pray stop!" laughed Conway. "You actually make me blush."

The outfit gazed at the visitor inquiringly.

"Now that you have said so much I am going to confide another little secret to you. I'm McKay."

"What? Not Captain McKay, the leader of the Rangers?"

"The same."

Professor Zepplin thrust a brown hand across the table, grasping the hand of their visitor.

"Well, this is indeed a surprise. I can't begin to tell you how glad we are to see you," answered the professor with enthusiasm.

"Same to you, pardner," grinned the captain. "You see I didn't want to open up too freely until I was sure to whom I was talking. Of course if you and Withem are cahoots, it's all right."

"It certainly is all right. We had the pleasure of being of some service to Lieutenant—"

"Ouch!" howled Stacy. Tad had tipped the pot of hot coffee into the fat boy's lap, and for a few moments confusion reigned.

"Don't talk too much," whispered Butler leaning over to brush away some drops that had fallen on the professor's shirt.

"Eh? Eh? What's that?"

Tad was embarrassed. He began speaking of something else. Professor Zepplin did not repeat his question.

"I understand my men picked up a fellow named Dunk Tucker a night ago?" asked the captain.

"Yes, yes, indeed. Mr. Butler there is the one who is really responsible for the capture of Tucker, however."

"You don't say!" wondered the visitor.

"Exactly. Tad, will you tell the captain how you came to capture the man Tucker?"

"If you will pardon me, I would rather not."

"He's too modest. I'll tell you about it," chimed in Stacy Brown. Stacy, once wound up, would continue to operate until he had run down. He told the whole story from beginning to end, including the fact that he himself had been wounded twice, ere he stopped.

"Fine, fine!" The captain leaned back and laughed uproariously. "You are a funny boy. I wish I had you with me. I could teach you a lot about dodging bullets."

"I'm a pretty good dodger already or I shouldn't be here at this minute," answered the fat boy pompously.

"Where did they take the prisoner? Are you informed as to that?" asked the captain.

"They took him to El Paso, I believe," replied Professor Zepplin. "I thought you were aware of what had been done."

"I got wind of something of the sort. You see I have been away in another part of the state on a secret mission for the Governor."

"Exactly."

"Did my men say where they were going before they left you this morning?"

"No. As I have said, they left most mysteriously."

"Which direction did they take?"

"We do not know that either. They disappeared utterly."

"Just like Withem," nodded the guest, smiling. "But I'll pick him up some time to-night. I suppose they are on the track of some of the fellows who have been raising trouble around these parts of late."

"Yes, that's what the lieutenant said. They are after what they call the Border Gang. But I have no need to tell you about it. You surely are familiar with the subject."

"I reckon I know all about it, Professor. Was it some of my men who shot up the bandits the other night and—"

"No, that was us fellows," interjected Stacy suddenly. "We did give them the run. And they thought it was the Rangers too. Oh, that was a good joke. I nearly laugh myself sick every time I think about that funny scrape. We bluffed them and they ran away."

For the briefest part of a second the eyes of the visitor darkened. They grew almost filmy, then the old sparkle came into them and a grim smile appeared on the face of their owner.

"You sure are a fine crop of youngsters. You probably will be claiming the reward for the capture of Tucker, eh?"

"Not at all, not at all," protested Professor Zepplin. "My young men are not looking for rewards. It is reward enough that they were able to serve the authorities in the capture of a very bad man. We shall do whatever we can in our small way to help the Rangers round up the rest of this disreputable gang."

"Of course, of course," answered the captain reflectively.

Tad had taken no part in the conversation. He did not like this freedom of speech on the part of the professor. What they had learned were better kept to themselves according to Tad Butler's reasoning. Then again there was a faint suspicion in the mind of the Pony Rider Boy, that he could not clearly explain to himself. What did strike him as peculiar was that so much of the Rangers' movements should be unknown to their commanding officer. McKay had ever since coming into their camp been seeking information. Still, as he had said, he had been away. Tad knew that the Rangers took long rides, sometimes hundreds of miles, using relays of horses and making almost as good time as they could have done going by trains.

The lad decided that he was unduly suspicious. Suddenly, as McKay was talking, a shot sounded somewhere off on the plains. The Ranger sprang to his feet, his eyes darkened.

"Is—is something wrong?" stammered the professor.

"There may be. I must investigate. You will say nothing about having met me," commanded the stranger sternly.

"Certainly not, certainly not."

"I will bid you good day. I'll see you again when I may have something more to say."

With that McKay ran to his pony, and leaping into the saddle tore through the brush at a perilous pace. Tad observed what the others failed to see. He noted that the Ranger had returned in the direction from which he had come, rather than riding off toward the direction from which the shot had sounded. This struck Tad as a peculiar thing for a Texas Ranger to do.

"That's queer," muttered Butler.

"What is queer, Tad?" questioned the professor.

"The way he went."

"His leave taking was rather abrupt. But we know that is a way these Rangers have. Besides he thought there was trouble in the air," guessed the professor.

"Yes, but then why did he run away from it?" urged Butler.

"That's so, he did go the wrong way," wondered Ned.

"Maybe he's going to take a roundabout course," suggested Stacy.

"Exactly. You do think now and then, don't you?" smiled the professor. "However, it is not for us to criticise. Captain McKay knows his business perhaps much better than do we. And now, if you are ready we had better be on our way. We have lost no little time here."

The packing up was not a long job for not much of their equipment had been unloaded. The rest of the day passed uneventfully, the Pony Rider Boys continuing along the range of mountains.

About five o'clock they decided to make camp in a valley, beside a stream of clear, cold water. The place was thickly covered with brush and small trees, excepting for a small open space on which the grass grew high and green.

They pitched their tent near the stream. This done the boys began gathering dry wood for the campfire which would need a lot of it before the evening came to an end. Wood was scarce and darkness had overtaken them ere they succeeded in getting enough for their needs. In the meantime the professor had been

laboring with the tent. He had finished his job quickly, rather to the surprise of the boys, who were chuckling over the mess Professor Zepplin would make of it. The professor, however, was far from helpless. He might not be suspicious of every one he met, but he was a man of brains. He knew how to get along with his young charges, as perhaps few men would have done. And he did get along, without friction, retaining the love of every one of the Pony Rider Boys. They were always ready to play pranks on the professor, yet there was not a lad of them but would have laid down his life, if necessary, for him.

He insisted on getting the supper, "just to keep my hand in," as he expressed it. No one offered strenuous objection to this, though no cook ever had a more appreciative audience. The professor's biscuits were beautiful to behold, but when the boys came to sample them they shouted.

"Too much soda, Professor," cried Tad.

"No, baking powder," corrected Ned.

"Wow! I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to blow us up!" howled Stacy. "Why don't you use dynamite in the biscuit while you are about it? I think I'll go out and browse with the ponies. It's much safer and I'll bet will taste better."

"Young man, if you don't like the cooking, you don't have to eat, you know," rebuked Professor Zepplin.

"Yes, I do, too. What, not eat, and with an appetite like mine? Why, I'd eat my pistol holster if I couldn't get anything else. Speaking of eating that reminds me of a story—"

"Will some one please muzzle the fat boy?" begged Ned.

"You can go out and hide in the bushes while I'm telling the story," returned Chunky. "This is a nice ladylike story. It's about a fellow—a clerk who was out with a party of surveyors, running a line across the desert. The water holes had gone dry and they were choking for water when the clerk saved them and—"

"Ring the bell! Ring the bell!" shouted Ned Rector.

"Yes, you have told us that story twice to my positive knowledge," spoke up the professor.

"Of course he has," agreed Walter.

"The clerk found water for them and they were saved," added Tad, laughing immoderately.

"Did he?" demanded Chunky eyeing them soulfully.

"Yes, of course he did. You ought to re-

member the story. You have told it often enough."

"How did he save them?"

"He had a fountain pen, of course, silly! Have you forgotten your own story?" scoffed Tad.

"He didn't have anything of the sort. This was another clerk. This one had a watch."

Stacy glanced around expectantly. Not a face was smiling. All were as solemn as owls.

"He had a watch," nodded Rector.

"He had a watch," added Tad.

"I wonder if the watch was running?" piped Walter.

"No, it was stagnant," retorted Stacy.

"Young gentlemen, for the sake of bringing a long-winded discussion to a close, I will offer myself as—as what you call a 'mark.' What had the watch to do with their thirst?" asked the professor gazing sternly at Stacy.

The boys shouted.

"Come down with the answer, Chunky."

"The watch had a spring in it," answered the fat boy solemnly.

"I think it's going to snow," observed Tad consulting the skies reflectively.

"Yes, the air is very chill," returned Ned Rector solemnly. "Shouldn't be surprised if some one perished in this outfit."

CHAPTER XV

MAKING A STARTLING DISCOVERY

STACY BROWN looked from one to the other of his companions in disgust.

"Ho, ho! ho, ho!" he exploded. "Hard luck when a fellow's company is so thick that he has to laugh at his own jokes. Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha! It is to smile, but nobody smiles. You make me tired."

"As I have already observed, I think it is going to rain," said Tad.

"Must be getting warmer, then. A minute ago you said it was going to snow. It's my private opinion that you don't know what you think. Ned doesn't know any more. The professor is the only one in the outfit who has a sense of humor. *He* knows when it's time to laugh. Ha, ha!"

Professor Zepplin was smiling broadly. Stacy's joke was just dawning upon the professor. But Tad's mind at that juncture was in another direction. The lad had raised his head in a listening attitude, his glance fixed keenly on the other side of the camp ground.

"Did you see something?" whispered Walter.

Tad shook his head.

"You heard something?"

"Never mind. Go on with the fun. Get Chunky to tell you when it is time to laugh."

About this time Stacy got up, still chuckling to himself, and started for a cup of water.

"Time to laugh. Ha, ha! What! Ha, ha; ho, h—"

The fat boy paused abruptly. He was down on his knees about to dip up a cupful of water when chancing to raise his eyes he saw something that caused the word to die on his lips.

A man stood just on the other side of the stream, lounging against a tree, observing the fat boy with an amused smile.

"Oh, wow!" howled the fat boy, in such a tone of alarm that the rest of the outfit sprang up and ran toward him. "Wow! Look!"

At this juncture the stranger leaped the narrow stream and was standing beside Stacy facing toward the camp when the others came up.

"I suppose I should introduce myself before matters go any further," smiled the newcomer. "I know you, but you do not know me. You are the Pony Rider Boys. I am Captain Billy McKay of the Rangers."

Stacy uttered a shrill laugh, whereat the captain shot an inquiring glance at him.

"You—you are—are Captain McKay?" stammered Professor Zepplin.

"Yes. I had hoped to see you when you camped with Lieutenant Withem—"

"Yes, we were with 'em," muttered Stacy. "And I guess we've got 'em now."

"Unfortunately I was called away on that occasion. I promised myself that I should look you up at the first opportunity. I got on your trail this afternoon and as you were going in my direction I considered this an excellent opportunity to make your acquaintance. So here I am."

"But—but—" stammered the professor.

Tad was smiling, the others gazing at the newcomer blankly.

"Well, sir, what is it? One would think you had seen a ghost," laughed the captain.

"But, sir, you are the second man who has introduced himself to us as Captain McKay of the Ranger troop, to-day."

The captain's blue eyes twinkled.

"Indeed! Then I must have a double. I should like to meet him."

"You look like the real thing," observed Stacy.

"Thank you. Then the other man did not?"

"He did not—to me," answered Tad Butler.

"How are we to know that you are the captain in person?" asked the professor suspiciously.

"I wear the badge and then here's my open countenance," answered the Ranger with another hearty laugh.

"Professor, there can be no doubt that this is Captain McKay. I should know him now from the description given to me by Lieutenant Withem. Won't you join us? We have just about finished the grub, but there is more. I'll cook something for you," proposed Tad.

"I'll join you in a cup of coffee, thank you," replied Captain McKay.

"Lucky for him that Ned didn't make the coffee for supper," muttered Stacy, but so low that the captain did not hear the remark.

Captain McKay, the real Captain McKay this time, was almost boyish in appearance. He was of about the same build as the other man who had declared himself to be the captain, but the real captain had light hair and laughing blue eyes, as opposed to the dark hair and eyes of the other man. The captain's skin was fair. It seemed not to have suffered from exposure to the sun and storm of the plains.

Tad led the way to the camp, followed by the visitor and the rest of the Pony Rider outfit.

"Most remarkable, most remarkable," muttered the professor, taking keen sidelong glances at Captain McKay.

"You are Butler, aren't you?" called the captain.

"Yes, sir," answered Tad, glancing back.

"I knew you the instant I set eyes on you. You're a sharp young man. You discovered me before I got into your camp."

"Discovered you?" exclaimed the professor.

"Yes. He heard me. I stepped on a stick that bent down under my foot. The stick didn't snap and how that young scout ever caught the faint sound is more than I can explain."

"So, that was what you were looking at?" laughed Ned.

"Tad's got ears in the back of his head," added Stacy.

"I observe that all of you have pretty keen senses," smiled the Ranger captain. "Something smells good."

"It's the coffee that Tad's making for you," answered the fat boy solemnly. "How's the going?"

"Pretty fair. How is it with you?" returned the captain.

"So, so," answered Stacy carelessly. "You heard about my getting shot, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, I heard all about it."

"I got wounded in the fracas, I did. I'm going to France one of these days to fight the Huns. Then I suppose I shall get shotted up some more. You take it from me, though, I'll put some of those savages on the run before they get me," declared Chunky belligerently.

"Perhaps you will explain why your men ran away from us the other night, sir?" spoke up Walter.

"They were called away. I guess the 'possum hunt was too much for them," answered the Ranger with twinkling eyes. "You rather put it over my boys, young man," he said nodding at Stacy, whose face flushed a rosy red.

"What's that?" demanded the professor.

"Drove them out of their tent by unloading a bag of fleas on them. Ha, ha, ha! I guess you got revenge on them, young man. By the way, you're Brown, aren't you?"

"I was done brown down there in the bush that night. Mosquitoes were worse than a volley of rifle bullets."

"But—I don't understand," protested the professor.

Captain McKay laughingly explained. He told them how the Rangers had been so pestered by the fleas and other insects that Stacy had captured in the 'possum bag that the men were forced to get up and walk all the rest of

the night, until a messenger had come from their commander, ordering them to go on a hurry scout some forty miles from where they were camped.

The Pony Rider Boys laughed uproariously at this. Once more they sat down with a captain, but the same thought was in the mind of each—who was the first man who had passed as Captain McKay? McKay himself did not appear to be over curious as to this. However, after the meal was finished he turned to the professor.

"Now tell me about my double," he said.

"I don't know what to tell you except that he was about your age and build, dark hair and dark eyes, a very pleasant gentleman, I should say."

"Did he have a scar on his left ear lobe?"

"I must say that I did not notice."

"Yes, he had," spoke up Tad. "It looked as if he had been shot there."

"Exactly, young man. You are very keen. I put a bullet through that ear myself, more than a year ago. I suppose you do not know who the gentleman is whom you entertained?"

"No, sir," chorused the boys.

"That, my friends, was the infamous Willie Jones, one of the most desperate characters on the Texas border."

CHAPTER XVI

JOINING OUT WITH THE RANGERS

EXCLAMATIONS of amazement greeted the announcement of the Ranger captain.

"Willie Jones!" gasped the professor.

"That is the man. You see what a sharp fellow he is. I suppose he pumped you gentlemen pretty thoroughly?"

"I guess he learned all he wanted to know," replied Tad, flushing. "I don't recall much of anything that he missed."

Professor Zepplin wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"This is most disturbing, sir. I see now that Tad was right. He counseled caution. I gave no heed to his words of warning."

"Master Tad is a very shrewd young man, Professor. I guess I shall have to take him in with us."

"Impossible! Impossible!"

"Why impossible?"

"I could not permit it."

"Let me tell you something. Willie Jones now knows all about the part you and your

young men have played in capturing Dunk Tucker. He knows that it was your party that drove off his men when they were trying to get Lieutenant Withem. Do you think Willie will overlook that? Not Willie! Willie will be on your trail from now on. He will watch his opportunity and when he thinks he is safe from the Rangers he will strike—he or his men. Then you young men will need to be resourceful, indeed, if you get off with whole skins."

"Oh, wow!" groaned Stacy. "I'll get it! I'll stop some more bullets. I'm the mark for all the lead that's flying around in these parts, I am!"

"I am of the opinion that we had better leave the border then," declared the professor.

"Oh, don't do that, don't do that," begged the boys. "We never ran away yet. Let's not do it now. We have taken care of ourselves before this and we can do so again."

"Of course I do not wish to influence you. It is for you, Professor, to do what seems best to you. If you decide to remain I think I shall be able to protect you."

"What would you suggest, sir?"

"I was about to ask if you look to spend most of your time in the mountains here?"

"That was our intention, later journeying down to the Rio Grande."

Captain McKay nodded reflectively.

"That will suit my plans very well. I have come to the conclusion, from certain things that have come under my notice, that the headquarters of this band of Border Bandits is here in the Guadalupes. Search as we might we have been unable to locate their cache."

"You mean where they hide?"

"Yes, that and something else. You see their plan of operation is this. These men indulge in various forms of rascality. In the first place they steal stock when possible. This they drive over the border and exchange for Mexican goods, which they smuggle across the river and store away until such time as they are able to dispose of it. Of course there are some people higher up who are receiving and disposing of these goods. We are on their track, but we haven't sufficient evidence to convict any of them. The first thing to be done is to capture Jones and his band. When they are safely behind the bars the traffic will stop short. Perhaps when we get them all in limbo one or another of the newer ones will confess. That will make our work easier. In fact it is what we are depending upon at the present time."

"I understand. But will there not be danger in our remaining here?"

"Perhaps. There's always more or less dan-

ger, and Jones will never let up on you until either he gets you or we get him."

"I think I understand," nodded Tad. "You think we shall be able to assist you?"

"Exactly."

"Will you please explain?" begged Professor Zepplin.

"You can help us a great deal by remaining here. It is safe to suppose that the band will devote no little effort toward getting even with you. That means that they are quite likely to hover about in your vicinity. That will narrow down our field of operations considerably. We shan't be far away from you at any stage of the game; in fact, I think it might be well to have two or three of our men in your party all the time. Do you understand?"

"I begin to," nodded the professor.

"That will be fine," answered Tad with glowing face.

"Then we will be Rangers, too," exclaimed Walter.

"Yes, you will be Rangers, too," laughed the captain. "You are pretty good rangers already. By assisting in rounding up these men you will be serving your country, for, if we can put these Border Bandits out of business, we shall be destroying some of the Kaiser's worst trouble makers on the border."

"And get shot full of holes," added the fat boy.

"That will do you good. It will give you an appetite," jeered Rector.

"He doesn't need a tonic," spoke up Tad. "His appetite is quite enough for this outfit now. It's all we can do to keep enough supplies to keep him going. My, it's an awful thing to have such an appetite."

"Well, Professor, what do you say?"

"I am agreeable, if the boys are."

"Hurrah!" shouted the Pony Rider Boys.

"Of course, with the understanding, Captain, that you will see that we are properly protected?"

"You shall be. Of course there may be occasions when you will be going on alone. You will expect that. Generally we shall be somewhere in the vicinity. When we are all away it will mean that your enemies are also away."

"The man Tucker is safe behind the bars, is he not?"

"He was at last accounts," smiled the captain. "I am sorry Jones knows what happened to Dunk. I had hoped to keep him in ignorance of that until we had rounded up the rest of the gang. However, what's done cannot be undone."

"Where is your horse?" asked Tad.

"A little way down the creek. He's all right. Don't worry about him."

"By the way, when shall we see your men?" asked the professor.

"You should see some of them soon now. They know where I am, and a half dozen or so will be riding this way before morning, I think."

"You will remain with us to-night, of course?" urged Tad.

"If you insist," smiled the Ranger captain.

"Certainly we insist," emphasized the professor.

"Of course we do," added Chunky. "Maybe if there are any bullets flying about you will stop them instead of my doing it. I'm tired of stopping bullets. It hurts."

"Having stopped a few in my time I think I know all about it, young man."

They could not believe that this sunny-tempered, soft-spoken young fellow was the most dreaded of all the officers of the law who hunted down the desperadoes of the border. It was also difficult to believe that Captain McKay was a marked man who had been condemned to death by these same desperate characters. Something of the resourcefulness of the man was shown to the boys in a most marked manner later in the evening.

All hands had been sitting about the fire, the boys trying to draw out Captain McKay to tell of his experiences, which the Ranger was loth to do. What experiences he did tell them were such as chiefly concerned others than himself. According to his version Captain McKay had played a most inconspicuous part in the splendid work of the Texas Rangers. Not once did he refer to the fact that he was the terror of every evil-doer in the State of Texas.

Finally it came time to turn in for the night. The captain lazily rose and stretched himself. The others were still seated, but were preparing to rise and prepare for bed when the interruption came.

A flash and a report from the bushes toward which the Ranger's back was turned caused every one of the boys to jump. Tad had his wits about him.

"Down!" he commanded.

"Oh, wow! There it goes again," moaned Stacy. "They're shooting at me again!"

Professor Zepplin had rolled into a depression in the ground, thus concealing his body from the unseen shooter. But in the meantime Captain McKay had not been inactive. It seemed as if the bullet that had been fired at him from the bushes had barely shrieked past his ear, when the captain wheeled. His re-

volvers—two of them—had appeared in his hands as if by magic.

Bang, bang! crashed the captain's weapons as he whirled. A yell sounded off there. Captain McKay dashed toward the spot, followed by Tad on the jump.

"Stay back!" shouted the Ranger, but Tad did not obey. He proposed to have a share in whatever trouble was before the brave Ranger captain. Chunky had taken to the bush. The others were lying flat on the ground.

As the captain ran he let go two more shots. This time there was no answering yell from the bushes. But he distinctly heard a crashing in there and drove in two more shots. He charged the bushes utterly regardless of the peril to himself, with Tad Butler close behind him. Tad had his revolver in hand, but he was cool-headed enough not to indulge in any indiscriminate firing.

It was evident that either more than one man had been in the attacking party or else one who had been wounded had not been badly enough hurt to prevent his getting away. Not a sign of a human being was the Ranger able to find, though his keen eyes soon picked up the trail. He followed it a short distance, finally having reached soft ground, getting down on his knees and examining it critically.

When he looked up he found Tad standing over him.

"I thought I told you to stay back, young man?" he said sharply.

"I don't like to stay back when there's anything going on. What do you find?"

"There were two of them. Here's where they mounted their ponies. I wish I knew who they are. You see those fellows are watching."

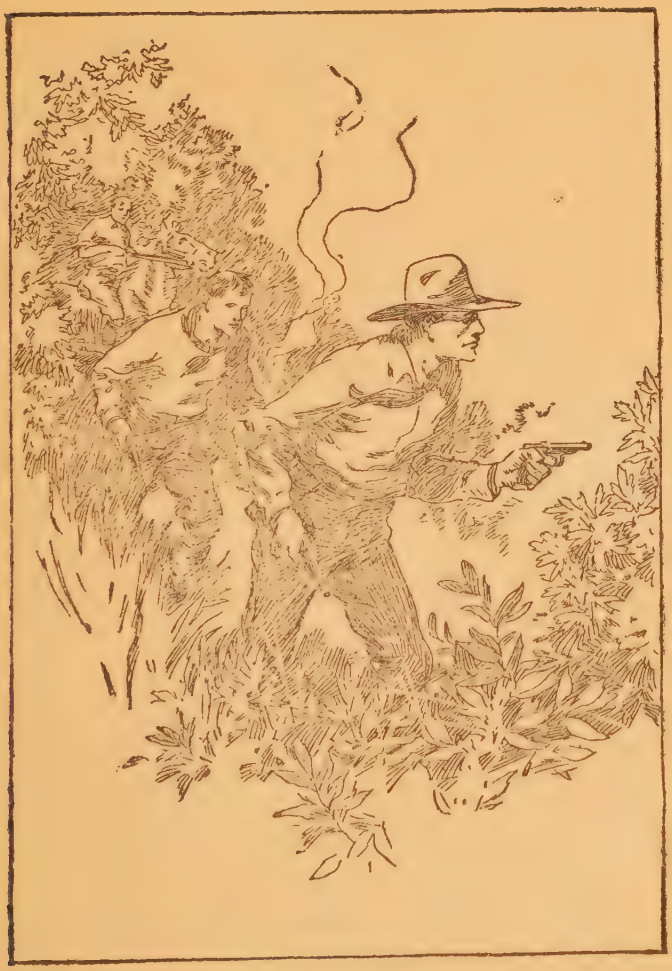
"Watching you?"

"No. They came here to clean out the Pony Rider Boys, I reckon," laughed the Ranger. "They didn't expect to find me here. But when they saw me they couldn't let the opportunity go without taking a pot shot at me. I moved—I stretched—just at the right second, or I'd have been a dead man before now."

"The cowards!" breathed Tad, his eyes glowing angrily.

"Oh, yes, they're all of that. They shoot when the other fellow isn't looking, and they shoot to kill. But we might as well go back. I could follow them, but it hardly is worth while. They will be hidden long before we can run them down. They'll leave a blind trail pretty soon after they get far enough away to make it safe for them to stop and cover their tracks."

"But, will they not come back again?" urged Butler.



"The Captain Charged the Bushes."

"Not to-night. They know I am on my guard now. They will put off their attack on you until some other time. Lucky I chanced to be here when they first came. I hope they don't take the alarm and keep away from you now."

Butler grinned. He hoped so too, though the others of his party might not share this hope with him, especially Professor Zepplin who was getting rather more excitement out of this journey than he had looked for.

By the time the two had returned to the campfire the others had mustered courage enough to stand up. The professor, his whiskers bristling, had crawled from the depression into which he had rolled at the first sign of trouble, and Chunky was making his way cautiously from the bushes.

"Captain McKay, how much of this sort of thing shall we have to face?" demanded the professor.

"You might have had to face a good deal more of it, had I not been here," answered the Ranger shortly.

"What do you mean?"

"That had I not been here you would have got the bullets fired at me. As I have already said to Butler, those men were after your party. When they saw me they knew they would not dare to waste a shot on any one else.

While they were shooting you up, they knew my arsenal would get into action. They figured on killing me the first shot. But they didn't," added the captain with a mirthless grin.

"I don't like this at all," declared Professor Zepplin with a slow shake of the head.

"Neither do I," agreed Chunky. "I'd as soon be shot to death as scared to death. I'll bet my hair is turning gray already. Oh, wow!"

"All hands, turn in," commanded the Ranger briskly. "I will stand watch over the camp for the rest of the night, though you will not be disturbed."

CHAPTER XVII

FUN ON THE MOUNTAIN TRAILS

CONFIDENT in the watchfulness of Captain McKay the Pony Rider Boys slept soundly all through that night. Even Chunky forgot to talk in his sleep, thus saving himself from sundry digs in the ribs from his companions.

But when the morning came again the lads were treated to still another surprise. Captain

McKay was sleeping in front of their tent door, rolled in his blanket, using one arm for a pillow. Still further out lay three other men, with one sitting up. The latter was none other than Dippy Orell, one of the Rangers. A second glance showed the boys that the other three men were also of the Ranger band.

"Hullo, Bugs," greeted Dippy upon catching sight of the fat boy.

"Hullo. You here?" demanded Stacy.

"I'm here, what's left of me."

"Bring any 'possum for breakfast?" grinned Chunky.

"No, but I've a rod in pickle for you."

"All right. Keep it in pickle for yourself. I don't like sour stuff."

"Hey, there, Bugs!" greeted another Ranger sitting up.

"My name's Brown," Stacy informed him with dignity. "When did you come in?"

"We blew in with the dawn," answered Dippy.

"And we're going to blow out with the sun," added Polly Perkins.

"Say, Kid," growled Cad Morgan, rubbing his eyes sleepily as he sat up blinking.

"His name is Bugs," interrupted Dippy.

"All right. Say, Bugs, I've got some news for you."

"I don't care about any news you've got to give out. It's probably got a bullet in it somewhere. I'm sick of bullets. What I need is a little rest from chunks of lead. I'm coming down with nervous prostration as it is. Everything seems to happen around me. No matter what I do, I always get the worst of it. Why, that reminds me—"

"Is Chunky going to tell a story?" cried Ned, stepping over the sleeping captain as he came out.

"It sounds that way," laughed Tad. "Go on. The Rangers are here to protect us if you tell another watch story. I reckon they'll arrest you if you try anything like that on them."

"As I was saying that reminds me of a couple of years ago when my uncle bought a lawn mower because the grass was getting so long in our front yard that the cats couldn't chew it—"

"Cats chew it?" jeered Dippy.

"Yes, before a rainstorm. They always do."

"Go on, go on. I'm pretty tough," urged Polly. "But don't drive me too far or I'll buck."

"As I was about to say—"

"You said that once before."

"I offered to run the lawn mower. Uncle thought that was fine. You see work and I

never had hitched very well together. But I thought that would be some fun. So I started in mowing the yard the next morning," finished Chunky thoughtfully.

"Well, what happened?"

"Would you believe it, be—before I'd been at work half an hour, the town constable came up and arrested me for exceeding the speed limit. Now—now wasn't that hard luck?"

The Rangers gazed at each other hopelessly. No one laughed, though Walter Perkins was heard to chuckle under his breath.

"If it might be proper, I reckon I'd like to ask what being arrested for exceeding the speed limit has got to do with catching bugs in a 'possum bag?" demanded Dippy Orell.

"Why—why—the—the constable came up in a buggy, don't you see? Ha, ha. Don't laugh. It might hurt your countenance. I'm used to laughing at my own jokes and—"

"Hee—haw, hee—haw!" wheezed Polly in imitation of a donkey. "What'd we better do with him, fellows?"

"I reckon I'd better tell him the news I was going to," answered Morgan.

"I reckon that'll take the starch out of him right smart," nodded Polly.

"Dunk Tucker has got away, Bugs."

"Eh?" Chunky was interested at once.

"Don't make me say it so many times. It hurts me. I said that Dunk Tucker has got away. He 'busted' out of the calaboose over at El Paso some time yesterday morning and he's on the warpath."

"G—g—g—got away?" gasped Chunky.

"Yep, and he's heading in this direction to get even with you fellows for taking him up. What d'ye think of that, Bugs?"

"Oh, help!" groaned the fat boy.

"Is this right?" questioned Tad. "Has Tucker really escaped?"

The Rangers nodded.

"That's what we're here for, to catch him up when he makes connections with his crowd again. I reckon he'll be on the trail of this outfit, first of all, before he joins out with his own outfit. He'll never rest till he puts a hunk of cold lead under the skins of the fellows who got him."

"This is where I—I get shot again," wailed Stacy. "I knew it. I knew something else would come along to spoil all my fun!"

"No use trying to sleep in this bedlam," cried Captain McKay springing to his feet. "Saddle up. I want to make the Ten-Mile cross-trail before noon. We'll find two men waiting there for orders. Professor, can you get under way at once?"

"Of course we can," answered Tad for the professor.

"Don't we get any breakfast?" cried Chunky.

"Yes, but you'll eat it cold this morning."

"Oh, pooh!"

"If you are going to be a Ranger you must be willing to take a Ranger's fare," smiled the captain.

"I haven't said I wanted to be a Ranger. I don't. I want to be a peaceful citizen."

"With four square meals a day and a whole pie thrown in," suggested Cad.

"Something like that," smiled Stacy.

The tent was already coming down. The Pony Rider Boys showed the Rangers that they were used to quick work. Twenty minutes later the boys were ready. The Rangers had watched their preparations with interest.

"Good work," said Captain McKay approvingly.

"Anybody'd think you had traveled with a one-hoss circus," grinned Dippy.

"We've got some of the animals left yet," laughed Tad.

"The Fattest Boy on Earth and—" began Polly when Chunky shied a tent stake at the head of the Ranger, thus sharply ending the discussion. A few moments later they were on

their way. The boys had to ride rather fast to keep up with their escort, for the Rangers were rapid riders under all circumstances. A great deal of their success was due to their ability to cover long distances between daylight and dawn or sunrise and sunset, appearing in localities where they were not in the least expected. In this way they had been enabled to make many important captures. But the riders did not move so rapidly in this instance that they were not able to poke fun at the fat boy. Stacy was the butt of almost every joke.

To all of this Stacy Brown did not give very much heed. He was planning how he could turn the tables on the Rangers again, amusing himself with whistling, making queer noises in his throat, trying to imitate birds that he passed.

But all at once there came a sudden end to his practice. Stacy's pony suddenly leaped to one side, planting its front feet firmly on the ground and arching its back like an angry cat at bay. Stacy did a beautiful curve in the air, landing on his shoulders on the hard ground. He had a narrow escape from breaking his neck.

The Rangers howled. They were still howling when Stacy, getting his breath back, sat up, hunching his shoulders to get the kink out of

them, and rubbing himself gingerly. The pony stood looking at its young master sheepishly.

"What's the trouble, Stacy?" cried Tad riding back.

"I—I fell off."

"I know you did. There couldn't be any mistake about that, but what caused him to throw you?"

"I—I don't know."

"That pony was frightened at something. What was it?" demanded the captain of Cad Morgan.

"I'm blest if I know, Captain. There wasn't anything that I saw."

"Take a scout around through the brush, you and Polly. There may be some one taking a parallel trail."

"Yes, there may be some German raiders hiding out there in the bush, laying for us. We ought to have some bombs. They would clean those fellows out in short order," declared Stacy.

The two men trotted from the line and disappeared among the trees, while the fat boy got back in his saddle, somewhat more sad, but no wiser than before. But he was thinking a great deal.

"He must have got scared at some of my imitations," decided the lad. "I don't blame him.

But which one was it? I'll see if I can do them again."

Letting his horse drop back a few rods behind the others, Chunky went over his list of accomplishments in the imitation line, trying each one cautiously, keeping a watchful eye on the ears of the pony.

All at once the eyes of the fat boy lighted up. Something struck him as funny. He laughed aloud.

"Chunky's got them again," chuckled Ned Rector.

Stacy waited until all hands were looking ahead when he tried the imitation that he believed had caused his mount to halt. His success was instantaneous. The pony leaped clear of the ground, coming down with a jolt that made the boy's head ache.

"What's the matter with that horse?" called Captain McKay.

"Guess he's feeling his oats," flung back Chunky. The boy hugged himself delightedly. What he had done was to give a trilling tongue movement accompanied by a hiss. It was a perfect imitation of the trilling hiss of the rattlesnake. When Stacy had first given the imitation he did not realize what he was doing. He had fooled his pony. The Pony Rider Boy was delighted. He tried it again with equal success,

though this time he was thrown forward on the neck of his mount. This jolt nearly broke Stacy Brown in two.

"That was the blow that near killed papa," grinned the lad. "I never knew I could do that. I reckon I'll be having some fun with this outfit. Yes, I'll try it on right now."

Stacy spurred his pony close up to the leaders. The lad's face was solemn, but it shone like an Eskimo's after a full meal of blubber. Ned Rector was next ahead of the fat boy. Chunky pretended not to see Rector. Riding close up to him, the fat boy softly gave his rattlesnake imitation.

Ned Rector made a high dive, landing head first in a thicket of mesquite brush, while his pony was left kicking and bucking on the trail. Stacy was having more trouble with his own pony.

"Whoa, there, you fool! Whoa! What's got into this beastly pinto?" howled the fat boy.

"That's what I'd like to know too," snapped the captain, wheeling his horse, giving the fat boy a quick, sharp glance.

Ned, having picked himself out of the mesquite bush, was limping back.

"You hit him, Stacy Brown!" shouted Rector.

"I never touched him. What's the matter with you?" protested Chunky indignantly.

"No quarreling, boys," warned the professor.

"Well, he doesn't want to be poking my pony!"

"Well, he doesn't want to be accusing me of poking his old bundle of bones."

"Pretty lively critter for a bundle of bones, I should say," answered the captain grimly.

"Nobody trailing," announced the scouts returning a few minutes later. The captain may have had a suspicion, but if so he kept it to himself, making no reply to the report of his two scouts.

For reasons best known to himself Stacy did not give his rattlesnake imitation again. But every little while a broad grin would grow on his countenance, which the fat boy would suppress as quickly as possible.

"This is too good a thing to be nipped in the bud," he muttered. "No, sir, I don't give my secrets away yet awhile. Mebby I never shall."

Stacy well knew that swift punishment would be meted out to him if the others caught him at his new trick, so the fat boy kept silent, looking the picture of innocence.

CHAPTER XVIII

ONE HISS TOO MANY

THE Ten-Mile cross trail was made about half past one o'clock in the afternoon. Walter Perkins entered the camp on his head, Tad Butler hanging to the mane of his bucking pony, both feet out of the stirrups, Stacy Brown making desperate efforts to quiet his own mount.

The ponies had heard the soft hiss of a rattlesnake, but the ears of Rangers and Pony Riders had failed to catch the sound. Perhaps it was the yell that the fat boy had uttered instantly after giving the imitation that had too suddenly attracted the attention of the party.

"What's the matter with those fool cayuses?" shouted Dippy Orell. "What—"

Dippy did not finish his remark. He landed on his back thoroughly shaken down. He was up with a roar, starting for the pony with blood in his eye.

"That'll do, Dippy!" commanded the leader sternly. "If you'd been riding as you should have, you never would have fallen off. Now

you're off, stay off." The captain uttered a bird-call which was answered in kind. The boys understood at once that the Rangers were exchanging signals. A few moments later, a bronzed, weather-beaten Ranger rode into camp. He held a few moments' conversation with the captain, after which he rode away.

"Anything doing, Cap?" asked Morgan.

The leader shook his head.

"Something may turn our way to-night. Joe has been detained. I don't know what is keeping him. But we'll wait here till he comes in. Professor, it is possible that we may have to make a hard night ride to-night. Do you wish to go along?"

"Of course we do!" shouted the boys. "We don't want to miss a single thing."

"No, we don't want to miss a thing," agreed Chunky solemnly. "I see I've been missing a great deal lately. I don't propose to miss another thing as long as I'm out on this cruise."

"He thinks he's on a canal boat," jeered Dippy.

"Maybe if I do it's because we've got some mules to pull it," retorted Stacy.

"Ouch! But that one landed below the belt!" exclaimed Dippy.

"Our fat friend has a sharp tongue," observed Polly.

"I guess we'll have to file it. Might hurt himself on it if he happened to stumble over a root and fall," added Cad Morgan.

"Chunky, are you going to get busy and help settle this camp?" demanded Tad.

"I don't have to work. I'm a guest of the management," answered Stacy.

"The management disowns you. You're out in the cold world," laughed Butler.

"All right. That's good. Then I don't have to work."

"No, he doesn't have to work," agreed the professor. "Nor does he have to eat. No work, no eat, is the motto of this outfit."

Chunky got busy at once. Captain McKay had little to say. He was very thoughtful, evidently perplexed by some word that his scout had brought him. The other men made no further effort to learn what was disturbing their chief. They knew he would tell them if he wanted them to know. At McKay's suggestion, nothing was unpacked save the stuff necessary for their meal. Of course all the packs were removed from the ponies to give the little animals a rest. The ponies apparently had ceased from their tantrums and were as docile as if they had never known what it was to buck off a rider.

Polly was getting the dinner while Tad and

Ned were starting and keeping up the fire. The others occupied themselves with various duties about the camp, all save the captain who sat on a rock some little distance from the scene of operations.

Suddenly Captain McKay leaped from the rock, taking a long spring away from it, at the same time drawing a revolver and whirling. Chunky, who was passing at the time, was bowled over by the captain's sudden spring.

"Look out for the rattler!" commanded the Ranger sharply.

"Oh, wow!" howled Chunky springing back apparently in great terror. "Snake, snake!" he cried waving his arms to the others near the campfire. "Look out for the snake!"

McKay saw no snake to shoot at. Deciding that the reptile must have squirmed away, the captain, his face wearing a sheepish smile, shoved his weapons back into their holsters and strode back to the camp, where Stacy had preceded him.

There were no further indications of the presence of rattlers, and in a few moments the adventure was wholly forgotten. Shortly after dinner the captain sent his men out on a long scouting expedition, himself riding from the camp, taking Tad Butler with him. Tad was proud to be thus singled out. While they were

on their ride, some twelve miles to the southward, the Ranger captain taught the northern lad many things about trailing human beings. This was all new to Tad. He listened with rapt attention, though he hoped it never might fall to his lot to have to trail men for a livelihood. The captain also told him many things about the bad men of the Texas border in the old days. Captain McKay was a lad then, but he was out with his father much of the time, the father also having been a Ranger, having been killed in a battle with a desperado whom he had been sent to capture. Captain McKay's two brothers had shared a similar fate. Now there remained only Captain Billy.

"And I expect one of them will get me one of these days," he concluded steadily.

"Why not stop then before they do get you?" questioned Tad.

"A fellow's got to die some time, hasn't he?"

"I suppose so."

"And he won't die till his time comes, will he?"

"I couldn't say as to that, sir. I guess we are not supposed to know about those things here on earth."

"No, a fellow doesn't go till his time's come," answered the Ranger with emphasis. "So what's the use in dodging? Why, if my

time had come and I had quit and gone to the city to live I'd most likely be run over by a trolley car or something of that nature. I'd a sight rather die in a gun fight with a real man than to get bucked over by a hunk of wood and iron and lightning, called a trolley car. No, I'll take my medicine, as I always have and—But let's go back."

"Still it is no worse than fighting the Germans," observed Tad. "I have wondered why you have not enlisted and gone to France, you and your men? What splendid fighters you would make."

"Every man of them wants to go—I want to go. I can hardly hold myself down, Kid. Every one of us has offered his services, but the government would not hear to it. Because of the activity of the Kaiser's agents in Mexico and on the border, Uncle Sam decided that we could best serve him right here on the border, and here we are," answered the Ranger thoughtfully.

"Have you found what you came out here for?" asked Butler.

"Surely I have," smiled the captain. "Haven't you?"

"I haven't found much of anything unless you mean that a couple of horsemen crossed back there some few hours ago."

"How'd you know that?" exploded the captain.

"I saw the trail they left."

"Shake!" cried the captain leaning from his saddle. "You're the alfiredest sharp youngster I've ever come up with. Oh, it's too bad that you have to waste your talents in a city! Too bad, too bad! You ought to be out here on the plains and in the mountains where one's manhood counts for something."

"Did you come out to pick up that trail, sir?"

"That's what I came for, my boy. I reckoned those two fellows who got after us in camp last night would take this trail and head for the lower end of the mountain range. That's what they've done. This trail proves that. Of course they may get sidetracked, but that's their idea up to this point. I think we are safe in following our original plans now."

Captain Billy did not say what those plans were, nor did Tad ask him. They now turned about and started toward home at a slow jog trot, riding side by side where the trail permitted and in single file where it did not.

On the way back the captain asked Tad many questions about himself, the members of his party and their experiences during their various journeyings into the wilder parts of their native land.

"Ever think of joining the army yourself, Tad?" questioned the Ranger.

"Have I? I am thinking of it most of the time. Oh how I wish I were old enough. I know I could give my country good services now."

"You bet you could, Kid. You would make a wonderful scout over there," declared the captain, nodding.

"Some day, if the war lasts, I shall go," asserted Tad in a low voice, tense with emotion.

Billy said he had been East to Chicago once, where he had been robbed of everything he had on except his clothes.

"Funny, isn't it? I'd like to see a fellow go through me out here in my native pastures. But back there in the city—" Billy shook his head. The subject was too great for words.

They found the camp quiet and in order. The three boys and the professor had been sleeping a good part of the afternoon, and without having put out a guard, either. The captain shook his head, glancing significantly at Tad as he heard this. In fact the two had to shout to awaken the party. Then to learn that they had been sleeping all day—well, there was nothing to be said.

"Do we move to-night, sir?" asked the professor.

"Can't tell you. Not until I hear the reports of my men, and the messenger or scout whom I looked for to meet us here at noon. Seen anything of that rattler around these diggings, Professor?"

"No, we haven't seen any rattler."

"We don't want to see any rattler," piped Chunky. "I'd snip his head off with my pistol if I caught sight of him."

"Yes, you would!" grinned Tad.

"You'd have to learn to shoot first," scoffed Rector.

"Perhaps Captain McKay will give us some lessons in revolver shooting," suggested Tad.

"From what I hear I guess you boys are pretty handy with both rifle and pistol as it is. However, if there are any drawing or sighting tricks I can show you I'll be glad to do so."

"Thank you. If we are where it is safe we will ask you to make good that promise to-morrow," declared Tad Butler.

While they were preparing the supper that night the Rangers whom the captain had sent out on a scouting expedition rode into camp, tired and gloomy. It was a personal and keen disappointment to every man of them that some ruffian hadn't shot at him once during the ride. Not once had the Rangers' weapons been out of their holsters. Whatever their mission

the men merely shook their heads in reply to a questioning glance from their commander. That was all. No words were wasted in explanations. The captain knew that his men had done their work thoroughly. No explanations were necessary. This perfect confidence and understanding between commander and men was not lost on Tad Butler. It was an object lesson that made a deep impression on him.

The men had returned with sharp edges on their appetites, but they ate in silence. Stacy had little to say at dinner. He was observing the Rangers with wide eyes, stuffing his cheeks with food and listening while the professor, Tad Butler and Captain McKay discussed a variety of subjects.

"I don't understand why Joe hasn't come in, boys," said the captain finally. "He had passed Tonka Gulch at four o'clock this afternoon. He should have arrived here a long time ago."

The men nodded.

"Perhaps he's come up with Withem," suggested Cad Morgan.

"I don't think so. The lieutenant isn't due there until some time to-morrow. He will have to finish investigating the El Paso end before he can come along and join up with us."

Tad wondered how the captain knew that his

scout had reached a certain point in the mountains when none had seen him or heard from him. But there were many mysteries connected with the work of these brave men. They worked in mysterious ways that added to the awe in which they were held by those whose ways were dark.

The night was warm and soon after supper the Rangers threw themselves down on the ground wrapped in their blankets. In view of the fact that the whole party might be called out all turned in early. The men had barely closed their eyes when suddenly there sounded the menacing hiss of a rattler right among them.

"Look out!" yelled Polly, jumping up.

"What is it?" cried half a dozen voices, as their owners sprang up with drawn weapons.

"There's a rattler in camp. Get a torch, somebody!"

Tad, who had snatched an ember from the dying campfire, was poking about cautiously, the torch in one hand, a club in the other ready to dispatch the reptile on sight. The Ranger who had been on guard duty hurried in upon hearing the uproar. He said he had heard a snake just after leaving the camp. The men jeered when they saw Stacy half way up a small tree, peering down at them with scared eyes.

"Afraid of the snake, eh, Bugs?"

"No, I'm not afraid of any snake. I just thought I'd get out of your way so you could work better."

The men jeered again. Morgan stepped over and gave the tree a shake, whereat the fat boy came sliding down to the ground. The search for the reptile was a fruitless one. After a time the Rangers turned in again. They had not been rolled in their blankets more than five minutes when that same fearsome, trilling hiss smote their ears again. This time the men were mad. They declared they'd find the "pizen critter" before ever they turned in again.

"Pile on some wood. We've got to have light here," ordered the captain. "Where was he?"

"That's what we're trying to find out, Captain. It isn't any easy matter to locate a sound like that. The critter may be 'most anywhere."

"Have—have you looked in your pockets?" stammered Stacy.

"Yes, maybe he's crawled in your clothes to get warm," grinned Tad.

"Oh, close up!" growled a tired Ranger.

"I was just trying to help you," answered Chunky indignantly. "You needn't get mad about it."

"No, don't grouch," laughed the captain. "We are losing too much time as it is. Better roll in your blankets and go to sleep. The fire will drive the fellow away."

Some of the men tried to sleep standing, leaning against trees. Others took the chance and rolled in their blankets. But there was little rest in the camp that night. About the time the men had settled down, they would be awakened to their surroundings by that same trilling hiss. It was beginning to get on the nerves of the Rangers. They were getting mad. The Pony Rider Boys felt a sense of discomfort too, though none showed any nervousness. It was not the first time the young explorers had passed through such an experience. Just the same they would have preferred to be in some other locality just then.

Finally Stacy went to sleep. When he woke up with a start, he tried to recall what had been going on when he dropped off. Then he remembered. He had been indulging in his famous imitation of an angry serpent. Had any of the men been awake at the moment he might have seen the fat boy's blanket shaking as if the boy were sobbing. But Stacy Brown was not sobbing.

It was some moments before he had subdued his merriment sufficiently to hiss again. The

hiss was unheard. Stacy opened his eyes as he saw the captain striding into camp. He saw McKay awaken the Rangers, then start to arouse the Pony Rider Boys. In his wonderment at the proceeding Stacy forgot to hiss again for some time.

"Saddle up," commanded the captain sharply, but in a low tone.

The camp, so silent a few moments before, was now a scene of orderly activity. Every man in it was packing his pony and in less than ten minutes after the alarm had been given the men were in their saddles. The Pony Rider Boys were full of anticipation. It looked to them as if something were going to develop that was worth while.

Starting off in single file the men dozed in their saddles, but the Pony Rider Boys did not. The latter were too much excited for sleep. All at once that trilling hiss came again. Two dozing Rangers landed on their backs in the bush. The party was in an uproar, but as suddenly quieted by a stern word from the captain. The latter wondered at their being followed by a rattler. It was peculiar to say the least.

Stacy hissed again. Then the boy shivered, for a heavy hand was laid on his arm, closing over it until the fat boy yelled.

"Ouch! Let go of my arm!" he cried.

"Young man, I think I've got the rattler this time," said the stern voice of Captain Billy McKay, as the fat boy fairly shrank within himself.

CHAPTER XIX

SURROUNDING THE ENEMY

"WHAT'S that?" roared Dippy.

"Here's your rattler. I've been suspecting him ever since early in the evening. This young man has been imitating a rattler's hiss and I must say he did it mighty well."

"What's that? 'Bugs' been causing us all this trouble?" demanded Dippy. "Let me at him! Let me at him!"

"Here, take him, but don't make too much noise about it," grinned the Ranger captain. "And don't be too rough about it, either."

Dippy had Stacy by the collar. With a powerful hand he jerked the fat boy across his saddle and such a spanking as Stacy Brown got that night he had not had since he was considerably younger. The other Rangers clamored for a chance at him, but after Dippy had finished the captain decided that the fat boy had

had enough. There was stern business on hand. Still McKay thought a lesson might not come amiss at that time, so he had permitted the little diversion.

Growling and threatening, Stacy was dropped back into his saddle.

"Remember, we haven't had our turn yet," warned Cad Morgan. "Remember, you've spoiled a few hours of sleep for us fellows."

"Yes and re—re—remember you made me stand in the mesquite bush for three hours waiting for the 'possum to jump into the bag," reminded Stacy. "I guess we are about even now. But, if you want some more trouble, I'll think some up for you. If I can't think it out alone Tad will help me."

"I don't believe you need any assistance," laughed the captain. "No more disturbance now. Gentlemen, I am going to divide up our party. The time has arrived for me to tell you my plans. I have received information from one of my scouts that some half dozen of the men we want are heading for a point yonder in the mountains. They are to rendezvous at a place about three miles from here where they are to meet others of their outfit. It is my intention to surround them. One of my men is now on their trail, following them as closely as possible. There may be some shooting. If any

of you wish to stay back you may go into camp right here and we will pick you up later."

"No, no! Take us along!" begged the boys. "We want to go!"

The party broke up, the captain taking Tad and the trouble-finding Stacy Brown with him, after he had sent the others out in pairs.

"Forward, and no loud talking," finally came the order. "And you, Brown, remember this is serious business, and a slip may cause you to stop a bullet."

Two miles along the trail and McKay halted. "Butler, you take to the right; don't shoot unless you have to; our signal is the hoot of an owl, so move slowly when you hear it. I'll take Brown with me, and we may be able to trap that gang. You're not afraid?"

"No, sir!" Tad moved off without another word, riding to the right until he heard the hoot of an owl. The night was dark, but the pony found a silent way along. It was a trying situation for the boy.

Riding cautiously, Tad heard a peculiar whistle, and knew it for some sort of signal, probably made by the enemy. He wondered if he had been discovered, and decided to answer the call. He whistled in imitation. Instantly a bullet whined over his head. "Wo-o-o-o-o!" Tad knew that he had done the wrong

thing, and he slipped from his pony and darted to one side, firing several times as he went. Half a dozen shots answered, and then the sound of hoof beats told him that his enemy was gone. He gave the owl call, and McKay and Chunky came riding hard.

"That was one of the outposts," explained the Ranger when Tad had told his story. "He'll give the alarm." As he spoke a succession of shots rang out. "Stick to me! Close in, boys! Ride and shout!"

The three dashed forward with shrill yells, toward the sound of the shooting, and from other directions they saw their fellows riding in. Soon they narrowed into a circle. But the circle was empty! The enemy had escaped!

The disgruntled men looked in amazement at each other. "They have given us the slip," grunted the captain. "How, I do not see."

Tad was also puzzled over the manner in which the foe had slipped through the Rangers' lines. "The rascals have a secret hiding place," he thought, determining to make an investigation the next day.

Captain McKay made an investigation first the next morning, and came back with a happier air. "Ready for those promised shooting lessons?" he asked as he rode in. "Who can put

a hole in my sombrero?" and he sailed his sombrero into the air.

Bang! and the hat fell with a hole in its crown. The surprised boys turned with a shout to Professor Zepplin, who explained with a smile:

"I used to be the best shot in my regiment in the German army."

"Lucky for me that I have any hat left after that shot," grunted Captain Billy. "Any one else like a try?"

"Take the professor's hat," suggested Tad, and immediately Zepplin sent his hat spinning into the air.

McKay nodded to Tad, who whipped his revolver from his pocket. Bang! and the hat spun round. Bang! Bang! Bang! and three bullets drilled the crown.

"I thought you tenderfeet did not know how to shoot," wondered the amazed Ranger. "Do all of you shoot like that?"

"I suppose I'm the best shot in this outfit," bragged Chunky.

"Here, hit my hat," commanded Tad. "We'll see what you can do."

"Yeow!" yelled the fat boy, and with surprising speed he drew his revolver and sent two bullets through Tad's hat.

Walter and Ned each succeeded in placing bullets in targets.

"Really remarkable shooting for tenderfeet," declared the captain. "But I want to see you on the draw."

The lesson continued, the boys learning many tricks from the Ranger. "It's the fellow with the featherweight touch that does the best work with the revolver. He's the man to look out for," he told them.

"Professor," finally said the Captain, "I am well satisfied here, but I must go now for a part of the day, but I think my men and I will be with you for the night."

"We'll see if we can pick up the trail of the enemy while you are gone," laughed Tad.

McKay gave the boy a shrewd glance. "I am sure that you have an idea in mind," he said, as he rode away, without saying where he was going.

"Chunky and I will go exploring," planned Tad. "And we'll take our revolvers and practice." So the two friends left the camp on foot, the professor thinking that wiser than going on horseback.

After walking aimlessly for an hour, Stacy looked around him curiously. "Isn't this the place where we were shot at last night?"

"Yes, just over there; let's have a look," answered Tad.

They walked towards a large tree down on

its side with its mass of unearthed roots resting against the face of a cliff.

"I can't understand how those fellows slipped through our lines," said Tad. "They disappeared just where that tree is. Let's separate and find the trail between here and the tree, if we can. You go to the left."

Their search for the trail of the bandits was fruitless and they met at the base of the fallen tree. Stacy gazed up its long slant, and started to climb the trunk towards the branches.

"I see the prints of horses shoes here," called Tad up to him. "Those fellows must have been shooting from behind this tree."

Tad followed his friend up towards the branches. As he neared Stacy he felt the tree settle. A foot further and both boys howled in excitement. They looked back the way they had come and saw that the tree roots had risen several feet into the air, and, where the mass had rested against the rocks, was a dark and yawning hole! Chunky fell from the trunk in his excitement, and the tree fell back, closing the hole.

CHAPTER XX

CONCLUSION

"WE'VE made a discovery! A great discovery!" agreed the boys.

"It must be the bandits' hide-out!" cried Tad. "Let's investigate! Let's see if these rocks will hold this top down, and give us a chance to see what's in that hole!"

Stacy ran back to the roots, and once more clambered out along the trunk, and Tad passed him the heavy flat rocks so handy near the top of the tree.

"Fit as though they'd been here before," declared Chunky.

As rock after rock was placed, the root end of the tree rose slowly into the air and the delighted boys stared into the yawning gap in the rocks.

"Now, Chunky, keep your nerve; we're going in! It's taking a long chance, but I guess we are all right unless the stones trip and close the hole."

"We wouldn't be getting out of there so fast; we'd be buried alive, I guess," said Chunky.

First Tad, then Stacy, slipped into the dark

gap. They could see but little in the gloom of the cave.

"Light a match, Chunky, but don't drop the burnt ends. We don't want to let those fellows know we've been here," directed Tad. "Look!" he continued. "There've been horses stabled here! Chunky, we are on the verge of a discovery."

The boys worked cautiously into the cave, ten feet high in many places, in others so low they had to stoop to proceed. Deep in the cavern they came to a large room, and their eyes widened at what they saw. There were bales piled on top of boxes, and packs and bundles securely tied heaped in piles; stacks of guns stood in corners; and in a niche stood a large wooden chest, bound with iron, and securely padlocked. What a pirate's store to stumble on in the heart of a mountain!

"The bandits' storehouse!" breathed Tad. "This must be the way they disappeared last night. Our lives may depend on what we do."

"I—I—I'm scared!" whimpered Chunky. "Aren't you?"

"No," said Tad. "But we must remember that those men wouldn't trifle with us a minute if they found us here. They'd fill us full of lead. Let's make tracks for the outside and report to Captain McKay."

The boys made their way back through the cave. They faced darkness.

"We're caught!" cried Tad in alarm. "The tree has closed the opening!"

Stacy was speechless, and then cried: "They will find our dead bodies here! I'm not yellow, but I've got enough shooting and bandits!"

Tad made a thorough examination of the mouth of the cave, realizing that upon him rested the responsibility for the lives of both boys. Finally he sighed. "Stacy, old chap, I'm afraid we are in for a long stay."

"Buried alive!" wailed the fat boy.

Suddenly Tad grasped the arm of his friend. "Listen! Somebody's coming!"

As the root mass swung up five men and five horses came hurriedly into the cave, and slowly the light was blotted out again. Tad and Chunky had slipped behind a roll of horse blankets close to the wall, and peeped out to watch and to listen.

"Keep quiet," cautioned Tad. "We'll never get out of here alive if we are discovered."

Tad peered cautiously at the five bandits and shivered. One of them was the man who had called himself Captain Billy, and another was Dunk Tucker! Willie Jones, the most feared man in the State, and Tucker, who had it in for the Pony Rider Boys for his capture!

Jones was speaking. "Dunk, if you hadn't tried to shoot McKay they would not have been so hot on our trail. Your temper will get you killed yet."

Dunk's face grew black. "The only thing I'm going to get, Cap, is the boys who sent me to jail in El Paso, and I'm sure going to clean up that camp."

Tad well knew that there was murder in the bandit's heart.

"That's your fight," said Jones. "But as long as the crowd is together you'll do nothing. We are forced to hide out in Mexico now on account of your temper. It isn't safe to get this stuff out of here with McKay so close behind us. Is that clear, Dunk?"

The bandits ate a cold supper and settled down to wait until later in the night when they planned to make for the border. The hungry Pony Rider Boys shivered in their hiding place. The night dragged wearily.

Finally, the lookout, posted at the crack in the opening, came to Jones. "Something going on over there at the camp," he reported. "The whole crowd, McKay and all, are running round with torches. Looks funny."

"Got their rifles with them?" queried Jones.

"No," answered the man. "Just revolvers."

Tad and Chunky knew that they had been missed, and a thrill of gladness went over them at the thought of rescue.

Suddenly Willie Jones sprang to his feet. "Men," he called, "are you ready for a fight? Now's our chance! They've unarmed, those Rangers, and we ought to leave a few dead ones behind us. We'll rush them, give them cold lead, and make for the border!"

Tad could not repress a shudder. Willie Jones' plan was nothing short of murder. And the evil leer on the face of Dank Tucker did not make him feel any easier.

Jones was giving directions to his men. "Sneak out quietly and take good aim. Every man pick his mark and you can't miss. If their backs are turned, all the better."

Tad was watching with eager eyes and listening to every word.

"Ready!" commanded Jones. "Work the lever!"

One of the men grasped a lever hidden in the rocks, and worked it pump fashion. The bulk of roots began to rise, and the night air rushed into the cave. Willie Jones led his men forth quietly, and the two boys crept behind them with the utmost stealth. The bandits drew to one side, and Tad and Stacy hugged the earth and crawled in the other direction.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!" Tad Butler fired three shots, and had signalled to the Rangers whose bodies stood out in the torch glare. The answer was a shout in McKay's voice. "Throw down those torches, men!"

A second later, but too late, a thundering volley crashed from the outlaws' guns, answered by the revolvers of the Rangers.

"Back into the cave!" commanded Jones to the outlaws, and a minute later a shower of dirt told the boys that the tree roots again hid the bandits from the Rangers.

The Rangers were still shooting until Tad uttered the owl call, "Who-o-o-o; Who-o-o-o!"

McKay and his men immediately came forward.

"Surround the base of the tree! They're in the cave!" cried Tad, and then he explained to Captain McKay what had happened.

"Boys, we've got 'em! We've got 'em in a trap!"

Meanwhile, inside the cave, the bandits had had time to think and to question each other, and they had realized that Tad's warning shots had been made by others than themselves. And they knew that some one knew the secret the tree roots had hidden.

All that night and the following day the Rangers and the Pony Riders kept a row of

bonfires burning round the tree's base, and the second night passed in the same manner. Finally, about noon of the third day, the bandits gave up hope. There was no way out of the cave except through the fires of the guard, and under the aim of the rifles of the enemy. They decided that surrender was better than being buried alive, and Jones and the captain arranged terms. Soon five crestfallen bandits walked from the cave and into the hands of the Texas Rangers. They had left their arms in the cave and did not dare violate the terms of their surrender. That afternoon they were on the way to jail at El Paso, accompanied by Captain McKay and his men, and by the Pony Rider Boys.

All the credit for the capture was given to Tad and Stacy, and a share of the reward was set aside for them.

With the capture of the bandits, and separation from the Rangers, came the end of the play spell for the Pony Rider Boys. The last night in camp had come, and they were seated round the blazing fire, talking of the time when they would be old enough to enlist to fight the Germans.

"Professor," said Tad, "we know, of course, how you feel on this subject, but this farewell night is a good time for confessions."

"I do know that you know how I feel," answered the professor solemnly, "but now is indeed a good time for expressions of loyalty. As you boys know, I am a German, and I did serve in the German army. That was years ago. Now I am an American citizen, and proud of my country. When Germany made war on little Belgium and France I was sorry I ever served the Fatherland, and I offered my services to America, but I was too old."

As Professor Zepplin finished this earnest speech, the Pony Rider Boys tossed their hats into the air and cheered. But the professor also sprang to his feet.

"Wait!" he shouted. "One more thing to do!" He took from his pocket that most prized possession of a German, the Kaiser's Iron Cross. "I loathe this, now," he whispered. And he took up an axe and rained blow after blow on the medal until it was shattered to pieces. "That is what I think of Germany today," he finished.

The moment was solemn. "Boys, 'The Star Spangled Banner,'" cried Tad, the leader, and the National anthem rose on the night air, the youthful voices of the Pony Riders blending in harmony with the deep bass of the professor.

THE END